



O P E R A O M N I A V O L . I . 1

RAIMON PANIKKAR

MYSTICISM AND  
SPIRITUALITY

PART ONE  
Mysticism, Fullness of Life





# **Opera Omnia**

## ***Volume I***

### **Mysticism and Spirituality**

#### ***Part One***

#### **Mysticism, Fullness of Life**

# **Opera Omnia**

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Part 2: Spirituality, the Way of Life

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## SERIES FOREWORD

All the writings it is my privilege and responsibility to present in this series are not the fruit of mere speculation but, rather, autobiographical—that is, they were first inspired by a life and praxis that have been only subsequently molded into writing.

This *Opera Omnia* ranges over a span of some seventy years, during which I dedicated myself to exploring further the meaning of a more justified and fulfilled human lifetime. I did not live for the sake of writing, but I wrote to live in a more conscious way so as to help my fellows with thoughts not only from my own mind but also springing from a superior Source, which may perhaps be called Spirit—although I do not claim that my writings are in any way inspired. However, I do not believe that we are isolated monads, but that each of us is a microcosm that mirrors and impacts the macrocosm of reality as a whole—as most cultures believed when they spoke of the Body of Āiva, the communion of the saints, the Mystical Body, *karman*, and so forth.

The decision to publish this collection of my writings has been somewhat trying, and more than once I have had to overcome the temptation to abandon the attempt, the reason being that, though I fully subscribe to the Latin saying *scripta manent*, I also firmly believe that what actually matters in the final analysis is to live out Life, as witnessed by the great masters who, as Thomas Aquinas remarks in the *Summa* about Pythagoras and Socrates (but not about Buddha, of whom he could not have known), did not write a single word.

In the twilight of life I found myself in a dark forest, for the straight path had been lost and I had shed all my certainties. It is undoubtedly to the merit of Sante Bagnoli, and of his publishing house Jaca Book, that I owe the initiative of bringing out this *Opera Omnia*, and all my gratitude goes to him. This work includes practically all that has appeared in book form, although some chapters have been inserted into different volumes as befitted their topics. Numerous articles have been added to present a more complete picture of my way of thinking, but occasional pieces and almost all my interviews have been left out.

I would like to make some practical comments which apply to all the volumes:

1. In quoting references, I have preferred to cite my previously published works following the general scheme of my publications.
2. Subject matter rather than chronology has been considered in the selection, and thus the style may sometimes appear uneven.



3. Even if each of these works aspires to be a self-sufficient whole, some ideas recur because they are functional to understanding the text, although the avoidance of unnecessary duplication has led to a number of omissions.
4. The publisher's preference for the *Opera Omnia* to be put into an organic whole by the author while still alive has many obvious positive features. Should the author outlive the printer's run, however, he will be hard put to help himself from introducing alterations, revisions, or merely adding to his original written works.

I thank my various translators, who have rendered the various languages I have happened to write in into the spirit of multiculturalism—which I believe is ever relevant in a world where cultures encounter each other in mutual enrichment, provided they do not mislay their specificity. I am particularly grateful to Milena Carrara Pavan, to whom I have entrusted the publication of all my written works, which she knows deeply, having been at my side in dedication and sensitivity during the last twenty years of my life.

R.P.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

### *Hindū Scriptures*

|              |                               |
|--------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>AB</i>    | <i>Aitareya-brāhmaṇa</i>      |
| <i>AV</i>    | <i>Atharva-veda</i>           |
| <i>BG</i>    | <i>Bhagavad-gītā</i>          |
| <i>BU</i>    | <i>Bṛhadāraṇyaka-upaniṣad</i> |
| <i>KausU</i> | <i>Kauṣītaki-upaniṣad</i>     |
| <i>KenU</i>  | <i>Kena-upaniṣad</i>          |
| <i>MaitU</i> | <i>Maitrī-upaniṣad</i>        |
| <i>MandU</i> | <i>Māṇḍūkya-upaniṣad</i>      |
| <i>MundU</i> | <i>Muṇḍaka-upaniṣad</i>       |
| <i>RV</i>    | <i>R̥g-veda</i>               |
| <i>SB</i>    | <i>Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa</i>     |
| <i>TB</i>    | <i>Taittirīya-brāhmaṇa</i>    |
| <i>TMB</i>   | <i>Tāṇḍya-mahā-brāhmaṇa</i>   |
| <i>TU</i>    | <i>Taittirīya-upaniṣad</i>    |

### *Christian Scriptures*

|      |                                  |
|------|----------------------------------|
| 1 Co | First Letter to the Corinthians  |
| 2 Co | Second Letter to the Corinthians |
| 1 Jn | First Letter of St. John         |
| Col  | Colossians                       |
| Dan  | Daniel                           |
| De   | Deuteronomy                      |
| Ex   | Exodus                           |
| Gal  | Galatians                        |
| Gn   | Genesis                          |
| Heb  | Letter to the Hebrews            |
| Jas  | James                            |
| Jb   | Job                              |
| Jn   | John                             |
| Lk   | Luke                             |
| Mk   | Mark                             |
| Mt   | Matthew                          |
| Nb   | Numbers                          |

|     |                      |
|-----|----------------------|
| Ps  | Psalms               |
| Qo  | Qohelet              |
| Rev | Revelation           |
| Rom | Letter to the Romans |
| Ws  | Wisdom               |

*Others*

|     |  |
|-----|--|
| BC  | Biblia catalana  |
| BJ  | Bible de Jérusalem   |
| KJ  | King James Version   |
| NEB | New English Bible  |
| PG  | J.-P. Migne, <i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus</i> . Series Graeca, Paris, 1857–1866 |
| PL  | J.-P. Migne, <i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus</i> . Series Latina, Paris, 1844–1855 |
| RV  | Revised Version  |

## INTRODUCTION

This first volume of my *Opera Omnia* is partly autobiographical, dealing as it does with the most important theme of my life. It has been a distinct inspiration for all my writings, to the extent that it has become their indispensable hermeneutical key.

Mysticism represents the third dimension that brings all the pages that follow into relief and into life. The reduction of existence to the senses or to reason limits Man to the status of a mere species among the various life forms: that of the rational animal. As we shall repeatedly see, human life (*zōē*) is not just its biological existence (*bios*). Man is not only in the *likeness* of God, the Source, the Beginning, the Well-spring, the Cause (all homeomorphic equivalents) but also in the *image* of Reality, a *mikrokosmos*—as the Ancients used to say (up until Paracelsus and the followers of the *philosophia adeptae*)—that mirrors the whole *makrokosmos*. The distinction between image and likeness is more theological than lexical.

Although for practical reasons I have divided volume 1 into two parts, I should clarify from the outset that the two themes, mysticism and spirituality, may be distinguished but not separated. Few topics have had a worse reputation in some circles than mysticism, on which, to tell the truth, too much has been written, and badly; if we add the theme of spirituality as well, I fear that the situation is even worse.

As children of our times, we have uncritically accepted Descartes's second rule, believing that specialization would bring "clarity and distinction" and thus confusing rational evidence with understanding. Because of this influence, we have reduced mysticism to more or less extraordinary or esoteric phenomena, and spirituality to a training of the "spirit," conceived as separate from, if not antagonistic to, the body, as if Man were just a soul imprisoned in a body. Christianity, too, once believed this, in complete contradiction of the dogma of the resurrection of the flesh, marginalizing Man in a merely temporal eschatology. The influence of Descartes's genius continues to be considerable and the *res extensa* has been conceived as extraneous to the thinking faculty. What I would like to suggest is that without the corrective of mysticism we could reduce Man to a rational, if not rationalist, biped and human life to the supremacy of reason.

\*

The most concise definition of mysticism might be "the experience of Life." We are dealing with an experience and not its interpretation, even if the knowledge we have of it is concomitant. We cannot separate them, but we must distinguish them. The experience we are dealing with is complete and not fragmentary. What

often happens is that we do not live in the fullness of life because our experience is incomplete and we are distracted at a superficial level.

It follows that mysticism is not the privilege of the chosen few, but *the* human characteristic par excellence. Man is essentially a mystic, or, if one conceives of Man as an animal (a being "driven" by an *anima*), Man is the mystic animal, even if, as we shall see further on, our animality (although rational) does not define Man. Man is more *spirit made flesh* than rational life form, a *spiritual animal*, perhaps, interpreting *anima* according to Indo-European etymology (*aniti*; he who breathes; *anilah*, breath). *Anima* in this case would also include the spirit.

If we take the many "spiritual" practices down to their basic essence—whether we call them meditation, yoga, contemplation, *vipassana*, *tantra*, *jing*, or any other name—we can see that they all invite us to concentrate on the essential and to be fully conscious of the fact that we are alive and that we can live this life in its fullness without being tempted by distractions. Not every human being is of average intelligence or state of health; not all people are rich, good, educated, and so on, but all are alive and enjoy the possibility of knowing it. Indeed, we are all aware of being alive—though a full awareness of life may often elude us.

Usually, the consciousness we have of our life is associated with our interpretation, understood in the objective possessive case. Thus, we have an objectified consciousness of our life—interpreted through our categories, that is, and judged according to the manner in which we live it out. It is not the pure consciousness of life itself; it is not life that becomes aware of itself (the *cit anantam*, the infinite consciousness of the *Upaniṣad*), in whose destiny we participate. Sometimes letting life become aware of itself has a cost—because of the superficiality to which I alluded. This consciousness of life is not our private possession; it does not belong to the ego. That is why mysticism will tell us that if we do not overcome egoism, if we do not die to the (egoist) ego, we cannot "enjoy" this experience, which is within us but disappears the moment we attempt to appropriate it. Mysticism as experience of Life has a possessive declination that is both objective and subjective: as the experience (that we have) of Life, and also the experience of the Life (that is in us).

Until very recently (and some people still believe this today), mysticism was seen as a particular phenomenon more or less out of the ordinary, something outside the "normal" range of human knowledge, "something" special—pathological, paranormal, or supernatural. The ambition of the present study is to reinstate this mysticism within the very *being* of mankind: within Man as mystical spirit as well as rational animal and corporeal being. In other words, mysticism is not a specialists' field but an anthropological dimension, something that belongs to human beings as such. Every person is a mystic—even if only potentially so. True mysticism, therefore, is not dehumanizing. It shows us that our humanity is something more—not less—than pure rationality.

Human life is what unites all people but also what distinguishes them. Until the last century, humanity empirically believed in spontaneous generation: that life was not only what unites and distinguishes people but also that life was the absolute

transcendental of being, what unites and distinguishes all that in some way *is*. Life and Being were synonyms—even though Life, and Being, too, could be spoken of in many ways. In the nineteenth century, with the refinement of the *empeiria*, it was thought possible to “demonstrate” that life was the privilege of certain beings: *Omne vivum ex vivo* (Every living being proceeds from another living being). Thus, a new dogma arose around the time of Pasteur. Life came to be seen as a special feature of precisely those beings that were described as living. Reproduction was seen as the distinguishing characteristic of life, and its most obvious form was biological reproduction, which itself conveyed death. The great divide between inert matter and living being received “scientific” recognition. Any other concept became catalogued as magic and primitive thought. Physics, despite its name, was reduced to dealing with inert matter, and the life of God became a dilemma unless God, too, could be persuaded to die like any other living being—although some theologians attempted a defense through a distinction between *zōē* and *bios*.

Without denying the “essential” differences between beings, nor uncritically adopting the interpretations of other traditions, one could accept Life and Being as homologous, and the *analogia entis* could be applied to the *analogia vitae*. Taking as a starting point the Latin formulation, of Aristotelian origin, that identified the life in living things with their being (*vita viventibus est esse*) one could propose *esse essentibus est vita*: the being of beings is (their) life. Being is an abstract concept, whereas life is a straightforward notion. This intuition is in the same vein as the traditional belief in the *anima mundi* (which is so often badly interpreted).

We have moved far from the *mythos* of the last century, of which the two great figures of Sigmund Freud and Romain Rolland, as well as many others, could be taken as symbols. Although the former saw mysticism as an escapist psychological phenomenon and the latter as an anthropological trait of “oceanic feeling,” both of them placed mysticism within the sphere of the primitive and otherworldly. The names of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Surendranath Dasgupta, Friedrich von Hügel, Rudolf Otto, Friedrich Heiler, Mircea Eliade, Lucien Lévy Bruhl, Maurice Blondel, Henri Bergson, Jean Baruzi, Henri Brémond, René Guénon, William James, Aldous Huxley, Philip Sherrard, Evelyn Underhill, Robert Charles Zaehner, and others represent a recent reinstatement of mysticism in the field of philosophical reflection, not to mention numerous contemporary thinkers or indeed the traditional idea of philosophy, which was essentially a mystical notion.

Be that as it may, we have before us a Life experience circumscribed to something specifically human, given that we are speaking about the (human) experience of Life. Indeed, this complete experience of Life would be the mystical experience at its most generic. That is why mysticism is joyful, as in the saying that a mystic who is sad is a sad kind of mystic. Reality is *sat* (Being), *cit* (Consciousness) and *ānanta* (Infiniteness) or *ānanda* (Happiness), as the *vedānta* says.

I have used Life with a capital letter so as not to exclude a priori that life can have other dimensions beyond those inherent in its physiological and psychic aspects. There also exists a spiritual life, a Life of Being, and thus, paradoxically, a Life of matter.



Based on all the above, by "mysticism" we mean this integral experience of Life.

I use the word "life" instead of "reality," because it is closer to "experience." It is all the same in the end, but whereas "reality" is a concept that needs explaining, life is something that we can experience directly; as living beings we participate in Life, though, on reflection, we find we are beings (in life) who partake of Being. Ours is the experience of Life. We conceive of Being through deduction or induction, or at best through intuition. Life is something we live and are aware of. This book could have been called "Experience of Living," but that seemed too ambiguous.

For the sake of clarity, however, I shall often use the word "reality" instead of "Life," as the context requires. This introduction should be sufficient to define the horizon toward which we travel in the pages that follow. No extraordinary phenomena or merely conceptual lucubrations are to be found here, but rather an approach to the fundamental problem facing the human being—the Being that we are.

The experience of Life: Everyone is conscious of being alive and of the fact that life itself constitutes a supreme value. All else is dependent on this, or is bound to this, in fact. Preservation of life is the first human instinct. This basic experience can reach different—and inseparable—levels of profundity. Some may feel alive because they feel the blood pumping through their veins, with all the richness of passion and feeling that this metaphor conveys. Some feel fully alive when they think—that is, when they realize—that they are endowed with a wonderful capacity to feel the pulse of reality, for there is also an intellectual experience of Life. Then there are those who realize, with an even greater intensity, that Life transcends them, that it was given to them as a gift, a grace, even if it may seem a dis-grace at times. These three experiences go together in unity, and at different times one or another may prevail. To use the traditional tripartite anthropology, we speak of the experience of the body, of the soul, and of the spirit.

The experience of Life, as we have said, may be understood as a subjective possessive—that is, an experience that is not "mine" or even "ours," but of Life itself. This Life that was given to us, which is not ours, seems to need a subject. For some, this has meant hypothesizing the existence of an absolute Being: "In Him was Life," as many sacred scriptures put it. Others, in contrast, avoid the step of substantializing, except within the myriad of (living) beings. This Life (has) experience (of) itself, and each of us takes part in this experience with varying degrees of clarity and depth.

When I speak about the experience of Life, I do not mean the experience of my own life, but of Life, that life which is not my own, even though it is within me—that life which, as the *Veda* say, is immortal and infinite, and which some would call divine: Life that nonetheless one may "sense" pulsing, or, more simply, just lives within us. Of course, interpretations range from what is defined as an oceanic feeling to the biological sensation of living and the experience of God, of Christ, of Love, or indeed of Being.

According to St. Justin in the second century, the experience of Life (*zōē*) is the experience of the giver of life—since our life is not alive of itself but partakes of Life.

This is not to deny discernment, and thus is not to claim that all experiences (which are intimately connected to their interpretation) are alike and of equal value, nor is it to deny that through their formulation (interpretation) one may say there are false or purely imaginary experiences, for then they would not be experiences at all. We are not speaking here of the various forms of mysticism, but of experience itself—which we can only call human and which I define as precisely mystical.

In accordance with the tripartite anthropology already mentioned, we need to keep our three eyes wide open for this experience of Life, which is integral (untouched by the reflective faculties), as we shall see later. The modernist euphoria over rationalism (I do not say reason) has caused the atrophy of our third eye, the eye of faith (when faith is not reduced to a creed). "*Fides enim est vita animae*" (Faith indeed is the life of the soul), wrote St. Thomas Aquinas. It is this faith which makes possible the enjoyment of Life, "*vita [ . . . ] id in quo maxime delectatur*" (life [ . . . ] in which we find our greatest delight), as this maestro also said. The mystical experience that leads to the full enjoyment of Life. "*Philosophus semper est laetus*" (The philosopher is always joyful), the mystic Ramon Llull wrote; *ānanda* (joy) is one of the personal names of the *vedānta* Trinity—according to another version of the aforementioned text of the *Upaniṣad* (*ānanda* instead of *ānanta*). As the previously cited St. Justin the Martyr does not hesitate to say, faith is "the joy of Life."

We speak of the experience of Life, but we should not confuse it with any of the functions of our being. To live Life is not to think it, feel it, or do it, just as it is not to despise it or to wish to put an end to it. We have no other word for it. Life is to be lived. Mysticism is precisely this life experience, although just by speaking about it we are already translating it into language that requires interpretation. We speak about the experience of Life and not the experience of the duration of life, whether brief or long. The experience of Life is not consciousness of the passage of time. What one experiences is the moment of *tempiternity*. Experience is not measured by time.

An intercultural consideration may be required at this stage. The experience of Life redeems us from the dominion—not to say the tyranny—of dialectic reason, since we are not in a position to contemplate its negation: we cannot think of death, it is said, because we identify it with nonlife. We can think of life with more or less insight and be aware of it, but we cannot be conscious of death. Everything has its own possible contradiction: the tree has the non-tree, Good the non-Good, and even Being its non-Being, although this last thought is abstract and probably empty. However, we cannot experience nonlife while the (living) thinking subject no longer exists. I can think about someone else's death, but I cannot share that person's experience of it, and even less so (share) my own. One can have experience of Life but not of death.

It is, of course, impossible to "experience" nonlife, but only dialectical thought identifies nonlife with death. Death is not life; it is distinct from and also contrary to it, but life and death do not contradict each other—except in dialectic thought. We may not be able to have the experience of death but we can meditate *upon* it, and this (abstract) thought enlightens us about Life.

Furthermore, the experience of Life is the experience of mystery itself—the consciousness that we are experiencing something that cannot be thought. This is the very reason why, from Socrates to our own days, philosophy has been interpreted as a *meditatio mortis*.

There is more to it than that, though: the experience of Life also carries with it, at times, the experience of dying. It is not a pleasant experience, but equally there is no need to identify it with the anguish of dying, which is dependent on other factors more animistic and physiological in nature than spiritual. It is nevertheless an experience in which the body is present in a more spiritual aspect, like breathing. Any description per se implies an interpretation. I would call it an experience of human contingency, since life is not our own, and is not self-sustaining, but depends for sustenance on Life. If at the beginning of my existence my life was Life (although not mine), at its end it returns to Life.

If I were to sketch out in my own words this integral experience of Life, I would say that it is the whole experience of both the body, which feels itself alive to the beat of pleasure and pain, and of the soul, with its intuitions of truth, albeit with the risk of error, together with the sparks of the spirit vibrating with love or repulsion. The experience of Life is not only the physiological sensation of a living body, nor is it only the euphoria of knowledge that derives from contact with reality, and neither is it the fragrance of love born by sharing the dynamism that moves the world. The experience of Life is the more or less harmonious union of the three forms of consciousness before they are distinguished by the intellect. This experience appears to exhibit a particular complexity, which I shall call Trinitarian. It is neither a straightforward sensual pleasure nor a purely intellectual experience, nor indeed a mere unconscious ecstasy. "The human condition," the condition of reality, is always with us. The experience of life is at the same time corporeal, intellectual, and spiritual. I could equally have said it is material, human, and divine: cosmotheandric. To feel alive is to feel the fullness of Life within the bounds of our concrete limitations. For this reason, I have included the awareness of opposites, of pain, error, and repulsion, even though they are often hidden in the subconscious of our lives. Now, if we describe this experience as mystical, it should not be labelled as reductionist to refer to a set of three basic experiences, because they are not three—and I do not exclude in any way a hierarchy of this trinity of components. They are the indissoluble interweaving of a unique experience that embraces even the experience of dying. St. Paul says, "I die every day" (*apothnēskō*, a verb in the Greek).

The thesis of this book can be reduced to a paraphrase of its title.

The major stumbling block to a spontaneous outflowing of the experience of Life within us is our preoccupation with *doing*, to the detriment of *being* and *living*. Thus, mysticism requires a certain maturity that is easier to achieve at the twilight of one's life, when action, what has already been done, is in a way finished. Alternatively, to use a more academic formulation, the mystical experience is more the fruit of *being* than of *doing*; it is awareness of being as an act, rather than as the

outcome of action—this is also the great mystical advice of the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the Gospel: Love is supreme.

For many, achieving the experience of Life is not without cost, fearing as they do the experience of death, which is equally ineffable—and there is no need to quote from Zen Master Dogen, who intrinsically assimilates the two forms of experience. It may be significant that he waited many decades before writing this particular piece.

I anticipate the objection that this “concept of mysticism” does not correspond to any common understanding. My reply is that, in the first place, mysticism is not a concept, and I would add that the objection is not a real objection but merely a statement that I do not follow fashion. Proponents of this objection might still insist and say that while fashion is not to be followed for its own sake, in this case it is believed to represent a higher degree of maturation and reflection on what mysticism is. I realize that, although the context surrounding the modern study of mysticism is that of an enlightened rationalism, it is not what underpins the present study, although it also belongs to another clear-cut philosophy—which obviously I cannot deny. I could be controversial by saying that the texts recognized as belonging to mysticism are closer to the underlying philosophy I referred to earlier than to the philosophy behind the studies on mysticism—but, on the other hand, this point is not valid either, since the interpretation of a text cannot be reduced to trying to guess the author’s meaning. As controversy is not compatible with mysticism, however, I have preferred to avoid further reflection on this, concentrating instead on the description of simple experience. Of course this approach does not, of itself, guarantee freedom from assumptions that could be perfectly legitimately criticized—in fact, I heartily welcome such criticism, and I am always prepared to rectify a mistake and learn from it. “There is nothing greater [Greek *megiston*] in Man than to constantly [*aei*] learn and acquire knowledge [*prosmanthanein*],” as Sophocles is reported to have said in the fifth century BC, according to the third-century so-called Letter of Aristeas.

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The composition of this volume is simple: a first section has the title of “The New Innocence,” as authentic mysticism is not a reflection on Being but a free and spontaneous attitude welling up from the person’s fullness. A second section deals with contemplation, on which little can be said, for it is silence; three examples from saints follow, showing how there is no single concept of sainthood. The third section consists of a systematic and philosophical study of the mystical experience. In this section I attempt to confute the rather widespread idea of mysticism as an extraordinary phenomenon reserved to a small elite of mortals. We all are potentially opened to the mystical experience. The idea that we all are “God’s children” in so many religions has received a Christian formulation and is constantly repeated but little meditated upon. I added as an appendix a philosophical reflection on the supreme experience from various perspectives, as well as a prayer from my innermost being.





## A PROLOGUE INSTEAD OF AN EPILOGUE

All mysticism is nothing other than a *pro-logos*: something that comes before the *logos*. False mysticism, on the other hand, if we may make a play on words, arises when it becomes a "*pro-logos*" where the *logos* should be, and taking the place of the *logos*.

A truly mystical *pro-logos*: it expresses the ineffable. With all due respect to Wittgenstein, I would venture to say the exact opposite of his much-quoted phrase, although not the opposite of what the Austrian philosopher meant in the context. I think, then, that what cannot be talked about is what is actually worth expressing in words. The rest can be reduced to "linguistic analysis," and true philosophy knows that the wisdom of love is what really counts. All else is rational deduction. Mysticism is Silence, and the mystic is one who makes it speak; it is the word that derives from Silence that St. Irenaeus in the second century described as Christ: the *logos* derived from the Silence of the Father—and received in the Spirit, I would venture to add. Mysticism is ineffable.

Too often, mysticism is described as indifferent to human suffering—remote from the lives of the majority of our fellow human beings and high up in the heavens. What about the fate of our contemporaries who live in the agony of need and of exploitation by their peers? What about our world that has created misery where there was only poverty? Is the mystic indifferent to the present panorama of institutionalized violence and legitimized injustice? Where is the sense in telling people that humans are the children of God when they are forced to live inhuman lives?

Perhaps mysticism does not have all the answers, but it does teach us an approach that avoids falling into despair and allows a sincere smile in this vale of tears. My objective is not to develop this theme here; I just want to emphasize that mysticism is in direct touch with the whole of the human condition.

The path of mysticism could be summarized in the advice of the Sybil or in the questioning of the *Veda*. In any case, a few words:

"Know thyself!"—*gnothi seauton*—provided that knowing is more than an epistemic act and represents the existential identification with what is known, provided also that the self in question is more than a solitary rational biped and represents a Self that embraces all reality, as recognized by the great masters. "He who knows himself knows his Lord" is a *hadith* of the Prophet that echoes Plato. "He who knows himself knows all things," adds Meister Eckhart.

"Who I?" (*ko'ham?* [the other form]), provided that the *who* comes from the same origin as the *I*, not from mere curiosity, and represents the aspiration to know what must be known—provided that the *I* is not confused with my ego

and represents the self-consciousness that embraces everything. That is where our dignity lies.

Whereas Greece inserts a verb, an action, India does not even dare use the verb "to be" (who [am] I?), for fear that the question would arise from the mind and not from the deepest part of the "I" (self). The last line of Plato's last letter explains in just two words: *autos isthi*, "Be yourself."

This is mystical experience: "that existential knowledge through which one knows everything," to quote an *Upaniṣad*. This everything is not "all single things"; it is not analytical knowledge, nor indeed synthetic knowledge; it is not a merely intellectual knowledge, nor is it just that of the "reasons of the heart" (Pascal). It is the communion with reality that involves all our senses, the intellect, the soul, and the force, to paraphrase the fundamental precept of the Torah. One cannot love God without loving one's neighbor, nor one's neighbor without loving God. But one cannot love God or one's neighbor without knowing them, and one cannot know them without tending toward communion with them. We have stated elsewhere that the great heresy (in the literal sense) of our time lies in the separation of knowledge and love. *Cosmotheandric mysticism* includes the world in this communion, given that God, World, and Man form an indissoluble trinity. This is the *novum* of our millennium, although its roots go back to the beginning of history.

Precisely because all human problems are interrelated and cannot be resolved without reference to one another, the mystical experience of the *totum*, even in part, is related to all human problems, not because it knows the solution, but because it is part of the problem—and part of the answer, when there is one.

To repeat: Mystical vision is neither an isolated part of an experience nor just an individual experience. Vision includes the Other (as *alter*) as much as my Self, as much humanity and earth as the divine. It is cosmotheandric experience; the rest is reductionism. Mystical experience is the complete (human) experience.

As shown by the example of many mystics, action and contemplation are not mutually exclusive. Not only do they complement each other, but they also entail each other, since there is no true action without contemplation and no true contemplation without action.

The great crisis of philosophy in today's world is due to the loss of the mystical sense of existence. A philosophy as a simple *opus rationis* neither guides nor illuminates Man in his daily life. The sad thing is that the dominant (official) philosophy has already capitulated, thus leaving the field open to all manner of fundamentalisms and sects. Man needs a star, but, like that of the Three Kings, it is not static: it moves, even hides, and requires us to ask for advice and help, even perhaps from our enemy, although we may return home by another route. The star is not a tourist guide—just as cathedrals were not built to be visited by tourists. We need to search the skies and let the light of the star shine inside us, and then it will start moving. Man moves autonomously because of what is inside him—life. Man is not moved solely by what is rational but also by instinct, passion, love, hatred, pleasure, ideals, or perhaps by a will that does not always follow the intellect. And so the world

goes, one may say, without following reason. In any case, a purely rational response may satisfy reason, but does not move the human being. "And so the world goes," as they say. "If you don't like how the world goes," God is supposed to have replied to a democratic representative who visited him in heaven, "make it go differently." Reason has an ethical veto function, so that irrational things give you a sense of discomfort, annoyance, guilt, and, in the long run, unhappiness. Contradiction (the sin against reason) at this level is not only false but immoral. The driver of human actions is not reason but those "forces" we have just mentioned. It is quite clearly love (positive or negative) that "moves the sun and other stars." The mystical experience, as we have described it, is what harmonizes all human energy and channels it toward Good, Truth, and Beauty in their many manifestations; the mystical experience is not a luxury in human history.

In other words, philosophy, when not mutilated, is mystical; that is, it includes the three dimensions of reality as much in the object as in the subject. This does not mean, however, that philosophy can offer all the answers—not just because Man is not omniscient, but also because within reality there is error and especially evil. Having the diagnosis is not the same thing as giving the therapy. Something in reality escapes all intellection.

Similarly, the great crisis of religion in today's world is due to the loss of a mystical sense of its nature. Religion without mysticism is reduced to a more or less convincing ideology, or worse, a more or less useful institution; it has given up its goal, which is to show the way to salvation. Mysticism helps discover the third dimension of reality within human activities themselves. For too long, many religions have undervalued the reality of the world (including the body), worrying instead about the "soul," "heaven," *nirvāṇa*, or otherworldly happiness—despite the example and the protests of many mystics who have discovered sacred secularity ("God moves among pots and pans" [St. Teresa], "*nirvāṇa* is *samsāra*"; "on earth as it is in heaven"). Contemporary mystical experience integrates all these values in the ultimate sphere of reality, recognizing the *ontonomy* of every being. When I say "contemporary," I refer to experience interpreted according to the cosmotheandric vision, which, despite the work of many mystics, has remained in the shadows of modern culture. To say that mysticism must also enter into politics means that politics must be founded on a complete experience of its own field, which is the human community in communion with Earth and Heaven. It does not mean any kind of theocracy or "Caesar-popery."

The same can be said of humanity's "ethical" problems. To judge an action's morality by its good or bad results is as absurd as accepting the rules and regulations of a legislator as metaphysical criteria. Ethical principles are not the result of the application of a code (if anything, that comes into the legal field) and cannot be derived from cases that have produced good results (like not telling lies, for example). Ethics does not come from deduction or induction, but from co-naturality, from the very *ethos* of Man, and that is what the mystical experience offers us.

In few cases can the political role of mysticism be seen more clearly than in social and economic issues. Justice does not always "pay," and right behavior toward one's neighbor or toward the earth is not the most productive for those who hold power. Usually the mystic acts without a reason, without a justification extrinsic to the action itself; this is the secret of love. There is no journey, because each step is already the destination. A purely instrumental culture cannot be mystical. The great Judeo-Christian, as well as Islamic, crisis results from having projected eschatology onto a linear historical timeline. The acts of a mystic distinguish between the end (that is not for later) and the finality (that does not aim at something else). *Sunder Warumbe!*—for no reason.

Mysticism, in short, is not insensitive to injustice or to human suffering. It frees us from the fear of both, and so allows us to act with serenity and equanimity—but without taking away our enthusiasm or our indignation. Liberation theology reminds us that the voice and the cry of the oppressed are divine revelations, and mysticism reveals them.

So-called ecology, or the science of the Earth's (limited) resources, will not bear fruit, as is becoming evident, as long as it remains just a pragmatic science, aiming at better exploitation of natural resources. The very language being used shows that we have not changed our mentality: we see the Earth as a mere object whose resources can be exploited, while trying to make them last as long as possible. The word "ecosophy" is the fruit of mystical experience of matter in general and of the Earth in particular. *Ecosophy* is the wisdom that tells us consciously that the Earth is also a subject, and moreover, a necessary and definitive dimension of reality. It is not to be used, therefore, as a means, but treated as a fellow. Ecosophy goes far beyond the vision of the Earth as a living being; it shows us how matter is just as essential an element of reality as conscience or what we commonly call "the divine."

We have spoken at length of mystical experience and not mystical vision, in order not to fall into the aforementioned heresy of the separation of knowledge from love. Experience does not just have a cognitive element. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions," as they say. One cannot have a purely theoretical experience. The rational conviction that things are a certain way is not what we need. Experience overcomes the dichotomy between theory and practice.

This language can be understood by all, even the oppressed and the poor of the earth. I realize my words may seem obscure, but we should not forget that all language needs translation. The mystic is one who translates this language into action.

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To summarize: Mystical experience is the holistic experience of reality. If reality is identified with God, then it will be the experience of God; if reality is seen as Trinitarian, then it will be a cosmotheandric experience. We can thus remove the stigma of a mysticism that is indifferent to the pain and tears of the world, but without thereby limiting it to pure materiality (earthliness) or smothering it in

activism, given that mysticism sees the reality of the human condition in its totality and therefore does not lack peace or tranquillity, but eliminates fear.

In brief, mysticism, as we have said, is not a specialized subject or a privilege of the few; it belongs to human nature itself, inviting us to take part consciously—that is to say, humanly—in the adventure that is reality.



## SECTION I

### THE NEW INNOCENCE





## LIGHTNING

... At times it is white. It is very far off. It makes no noise. The thunder cannot be heard or only much later, and muffled. It is not frightening. It is not threatening. It is the serenity of theoretical thought. It is philosophical meditation. Principles are involved. For those who understand it, it is effective, and yet it is very far from being put into practice. The lightning may have fallen somewhere but it is still out of our reach. Intellectuals live a peaceful life. ...

... At times it is red. It touches us closer to home. This lightning makes noise. Sometimes too much noise. It frightens us, though often it does not even strike. For better or worse, willingly or not, our society is (still?) full of fear or hope about the Christian event. Some would like to rid themselves of it but do not know how. Others declare themselves indifferent, but deep down they cannot be. Others still would like to revive this church, but their movement is without orientation. This is the lightning of Christianness.<sup>1</sup>

... At times it is blue. It is very high up. This lightning does not strike the earth and certainly not "our" earth. Maybe one day it will, and the problems between peoples and religious traditions will no longer leave us indifferent. This world of the high ground is full of lightning. Here artificial isolation is of no use anymore. The question of the other begins to turn itself back upon the asker.

### White Lightning

Your left hand must not know what your right is doing.

—Mt 6:3

I have often been asked to explain how the resurrection implies a new innocence, especially since I have said that it is not a question of regaining the first innocence: Innocence, once lost, is lost forever, and the desire to regain it is not innocent. Yahweh placed cherubs with swords of fire at the Gates of Paradise to free us from a second original sin, that is, the wish to go back to Paradise.

There is obviously a metaphysical premise that makes resurrection possible. But here I will try to explain it more in an anthropological, and partly autobiographical, manner.

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<sup>1</sup> *Translator's note:* Here the term "Christianness" (a personal religiosity) is used as distinct from "Christendom" (a civilization) and from "Christianity" (a religion).

The spiritual masters of almost all traditions speak of what we could call "novice spirituality," the desire for perfection, *mumukṣutva*, the intention to attain *nirvāṇa*, and so on. It is a spirituality of purging, purification, *brahmacarya*, ascetics, the practice of virtue, *yama* and *niyama*, *bodhicitta*, and so forth.

We need to decide—and to compromise. This is the meaning of vows, the theology of *vrata*, obedience to the *guru*, striving, mortification, renunciation, examination of conscience. . . . All this is necessary to make possible freedom, co-natural with goodness.

But let us move on to a second point. We have reached the first point, so what now? Many schools, from all kinds of traditions, tell us to be always on our guard, to take care not to slip backward, that those highest up can fall, that spiritual life is dangerous. In effect, they are telling us that our life on earth consists of this constant battle, this constant alertness, this constantly renewed renunciation. And experience shows us they are not wrong.

The expert masters—some call them *bodhisattva* or *guru*, and others saints or simply sages or elders—tell us what I would describe as the fundamental law of authentic human life, which, in a conscious and free manner, aspires to the fullness of the gift which is life; this is not something given to the living being, rather the living being is itself the gift. Life is not given to me. I am the gift given by Life. I am born when life is given to me. I am myself the gift, the given.

Therefore, this fundamental law consists in the fact that those resources, *upāya*, tools that help us grow in life, in what we have superfluously called spiritual life—these very resources become obstacles, once they have been used. If you see the Buddha, says a text of the *Tripitāka*, kill him! If you see Christ—I have repeatedly said—eat him! If you believe in the Spirit, forget it! Do not set it up, do not make it an object, do not objectify it, do not make a theology of the Spirit; leave it behind, let it blow, drive, inspire you—not the other way around—telling it (*logos*) where to inspire you and where to take you. The Spirit needs sails to receive it and an attentive helmsman, but cannot bear mechanized pilots. It blows *when* it will, *where* it will, and *how* it will. The monotheistic tradition should listen to other traditions when they criticize its theocentrism. The Western Christian tradition itself says that God is a center that is everywhere, and that means that nobody is its owner. It also says that the circumference is nowhere. Theocentrism can become a way of taming the divine: We manipulate the center, since we are the ones postulating the center. What things people will not do in the name of God! Expressing myself in a more Eastern manner, I quote a famous Zen teacher, Wumen (known as Mumon in Japanese), who says that the essence of true Buddhism lies in being a barrier. This reminds me of the Gospel passages about the narrow door and the camel passing through the eye of a needle (leaving aside archaeological and exegetical issues). The barrier must be jumped over; the door must be forced, the needle broken. Was it not once said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear"?

But I have not yet formulated the second point. Let us discuss it now.

The desire for perfection, suggests an old Buddhist *sūtra* cited by Aśīśa, must be overcome by a stronger desire, by *adhyāśaya*, that consists in the “dissolving” (St. John of the Cross) of all previous desires. I say that the text suggests this, because my exegesis is quite a post hoc elaboration. It is a question of renouncing even renunciation, freeing oneself from the very desire for perfection, which can be a form of refined egoism and belief in one’s own superiority over others. A fundamental virtue in the Christian tradition—perhaps before it was devalued into a mere psychological or moral virtue—is humility. Only at this point can one experience Grace, *tariki*, the other power, as the *amida* tradition of the Japanese Buddhism developed by Shinran has it.

The new innocence has been freed from the craving for perfection, from the desire of improving oneself, which necessarily implies superiority over others. The new innocence avoids spiritual competition; it does not desire, as the Buddha says. It is pure aspiration, the fruit of an inspiration that comes from within and not from objectified thoughts, from the *vikalpa* of Indian traditions. It is the realm of spontaneity. Desire wants a *telos*, a goal. There is the desire for an object, there is the pursuit of an end; it is the objectification of reality. Aspiration comes from within; it has no cause, as the Franciscans and Dominicans of previous centuries said, and as Zen still upholds today. If we want to go to another place, we may reach our destination, but if we are driven only by the urge to arrive we will never get there; we will never enjoy the present, which is the temporary revelation of eternity. As wayfarers, if we only long for the peak, we shall never enjoy the walk. *Homo viator* means making one’s way and not travelling at top speed on an already beaten path. Besides, we would always be anxious about not reaching the goal. Man is certainly a nomadic being, *Homo viator*, but there are no spiritual roads. Birds and saints do not leave footprints. As the *Dhammapāda* rightly says, there are no pathways in heaven, and as St. John of the Cross professed, “This way there are no paths.” Man is a wayfarer who knows that every step of the way the path is a path, not a “muddy track” that one day will turn into a “glorious” sea when we shall be no more—as Job laments. “The walk is not made by walking,” says Machado, because life itself is *epektasis* (Gregory of Nyssa) as we go on living it.

There are no techniques for achieving the new innocence. It is the kingdom of Grace, say the *śaiva siddhānta*, Christianity, and many other traditions.

The new innocence is not a second innocence, a repetition of the first; it is not a second edition, or a revised and corrected version. It is new—so new that it does not remember being second, because it is not; neither is it a lost innocence regained, because what is lost is truly lost. As I have already said, the new innocence is not the reclaiming of Paradise lost. The new innocence does not come after the first. It comes after what I have called the first point, after ascetics, after purification. There are no shortcuts, no quicker ways, and no instant methods.

The path is *anupāya*; it has no means, in reality there is no path. But there have been; they are created and destroyed constantly. The patience—or, better still, the tolerance—or *hypomonē* preached by the teacher of Nazareth, through which we will conquer our lives, is fundamental here.

The new innocence is the kingdom of freedom. Freedom, however, means leaving motivation behind. Motivation implies that the object of our motives is what guides our steps; that we move toward an end and that we shall obviously feel cheated if we do not obtain it. Motivation is generally required if we are reaching after ends that are not quite ultimate. But here we are not talking about something penultimate that can therefore be mediated. The ultimate condition that I am talking about does not come after the penultimate but occurs simultaneously with every step. In this perspective each step is final, because it is definitive. Do not think when you meditate, say some traditions; do not think when you bear witness to me, say others; do not let your left hand know the good your right hand does, for then it will no longer be good. "Lord, when have we seen you hungry and poor?" If they had known, their actions would no longer have had any value; they would no longer have been true and free. After the parable about the tax collector and the Pharisee, one can no longer pray with a good conscience: if I behave like the Pharisee I will condemn myself; if I behave like the tax collector, once I have learned the trick, I am even worse. There is no conscious or motivated way out. To put it philosophically, reflection is always secondhand and, as such, corrosive. Only the Spirit prays with unutterable moans, says St. Paul.

The experience of freedom comes before reflection on the free act. This is so because it has no external causes, no extrinsic conditioning. Only a pure heart, therefore, can be free. The experience of freedom is the experience of the divine. It is not an object but the very act of Being, the doing that arises spontaneously from Being. And it is only after doing it that we can reflect upon it. What do, for example, Yoga or Zen affirm, if not this?

The journey entailed by the first point holds many dangers, as the spiritual masters tell us. The same does not apply to the second point, as it is not a path. There are no criteria. On what could they be based? It is a sort of all-or-nothing game. There is, however, the risk of going around in circles, remaining dazed and staring at the sky, as though searching for the risen One, forgetting that the resurrection is actually ours. We are no longer dealing with pathways.

The Buddha says—and this is fundamental in Buddhist tradition—that desiring *nirvāṇa* is as great an obstacle to its attainment as not desiring it. If you desire it you will never attain it, and if you do not desire it . . . you will not necessarily attain what you do not desire. Thus, neither desire nor lack of desire is useful here. *Nirvāṇa* is outside the reach of conscious desire. *Nirvāṇa* is not an object of thought or will. A similar thing could be said about God, whose name the Bible prohibits pronouncing or even writing. Reason is not Man's guide. We are told that love is, but love is not a guide; it is, rather, an engine, the self-energy of Being, life itself.

All this is not fatalism. If one wants to think in extrinsic terms, it would be Grace. The realization that the most fundamental things in reality are outside the reach of thought and will constitutes in many cultures the beginning of maturity. This consciousness brings a growing confidence in reality, which is the source of joy

and peace. As the *Rg-veda* and St. John's Gospel would say, it is consciousness of the primordial aspiration of Being that is given us by the word.

Allow me a brief philosophical reflection.

The new innocence is not the naïve dream of restoring Paradise lost. The new innocence represents the healing of the wound caused by the separation of epistemology from ontology, turning knowledge into a hunt for the object by a subject that has only to check that its weapons (categories) are clean. Significantly, Heisenberg had to remind the philosophers that pointing the gun already puts the hare on guard, that the subject's knowledge already modifies the object. When reflexive consciousness is framed by an epistemology separated from ontology, it is no longer innocent; it has hurt the object. Innocent are those who do no harm (*nocere*).

Innocent reflection returns to the subject without wounding the object, and does not begin with a dichotomy between the object—an objective thing separated from Man—and the subject—the subjective mind that aims the gun to hunt the object—and therefore it experiments to see how the hare will react.

Innocent reflection embraces in the very same act the knower and the known, because it knows that the one is not given without the other. Knowing does not mean hunting but growing together—the knower and the known. They are bound. There is nothing without Man. The thing is neither “in itself” nor “in me.” The thing is with me: *esse est co-esse*.

The trap into which most of the West fell following Hegel, who thought in the shadow of Descartes, is that of believing that *con-scientia* is not that very same science—*gnōsis*, *jñāna*—in which the subject and the object participate equally, but *Bewusstsein*, in which self-consciousness differs radically from consciousness. Animals are conscious, but only Man possesses self-consciousness—that is, reflection. Reflection, therefore, already means a loss of innocence, because it implies returning to oneself after having conquered the object with the aim of possessing it. Thus, knowledge starts to become a possession, rather than allowing itself to be possessed by what the scholastics, led by the Arabs, and following Aristotle, called *intellectus* (active and passive), or a superior light, as Augustine called it.

But, on the other hand, we are not dealing with a return to a precritical situation. Nor are we romanticizing the past, or relying on an antiquated metaphysics that is no longer innocent but guiltily unconscious.

A metaphor may be useful here. If I am listening to a symphony, I can be sent into ecstasy if I identify with the music. I am not aware of anything else. This is ecstatic knowledge. I am conscious of the music, but I do not have a reflexive knowledge of it; I am not conscious of being conscious.

But I can also have a reflexive knowledge of it. Then I am aware of listening to music and of whether I like it or not. I have a critical knowledge of it. I can talk about it and perhaps even make a comparative description of it according to my existing musical knowledge.

In the first case we have an ontic situation. I am music; I am in it. I have no other knowledge; it is pure joy or maybe something else. In the second case we

have an epistemological situation. I have a reflexive knowledge of music and of my condition as listener.

But another option is to be a member of the orchestra. With a purely epistemological knowledge of the musical piece, one could never become an outstanding first violin. But with a purely ontic knowledge and in the ecstatic state, the violinist would be quickly shaken out of his ecstasy by the conductor and reminded that he is not playing alone. He cannot forget that he is part of an orchestra. This is the ontological situation. When we forget ourselves there is no difference between the subject and the object, but at the same time we are not merely absorbed or totally objectified. We are neither pure music nor external observers; rather we are members of the orchestra: we are at once the music and the instrument. A better example than the violin would be the voice of the singer: voice, body, person, orchestra, conductor, and also the audience, although differentiated, are not divided. Ontological consciousness—unlike purely ontic consciousness—is conscious of reality but without differentiating the subject from the object. It is neither *extasis* nor *enstasis*, it is pure *stasis*, totally being, neither music nor diva, just singing. And this being is the whole orchestra, all the audience, and my whole person. This is the ontological state I was referring to.

Considering all this, is it not a contradiction in terms to write about the new innocence? Apparently so. If we realize it is new, it is no longer innocent. Wanting to regain the old innocence would mean a degrading of religion. This is why an angel with a sword of fire was determined to stop people from looking back—even when Paradise lost was Sodom. “I walk on a path without return,” shouted Job. “No one who puts his hand on the plow and looks back is ready for Life,” said Christ. Contradiction is insurmountable in speech. Life is word, *logos*, but logomonism is as suffocating as any other monism.

### Red Lightning

I would like to introduce *red lightning* by a reference to Heraclitus, as reported by St. Hippolytus, who said that lightning governs everything. He added that this lightning is the lasting fire—the eternal, divine fire that most commentators identify with Zeus. Christian Scripture also said that God is fire (Heb 12:29), echoing the Torah (Dt 4:24); every Christian baptism of initiation must also include fire (Lk 3:16 etc.). Jesus’s clothes during the transfiguration were shining with blinding light (Lk 9:29 etc.), just like those of the angel of the resurrection (Mt 28:3), and we have been told that his coming shall be like the coming of lightning that starts in the east and is visible all the way to the west (Mt 24:27).

The theme of light is a classic one in spirituality, while the idea of lightning tends to be somewhat frightening. Modern Man should not forget, however, that it has not been so long since the only sources of light were the sun, the moon, the stars, and fire. Lightning brings it down from the skies. The main metaphor used

to represent the divinization of humans in most traditions is precisely *enlightenment*. And when European culture tries to free itself from overly institutionalized religiousness, it claims to be enlightened. Lightning is one of the pillars of metaphor. In this case, the light of the sky falls on Man and transforms him, even at the risk of burning the old man.

Dante effectively ends his *Commedia* with a reference to the flashing of the Divinity. This is the bolt that strikes the mind created in order to open itself to the divine mystery:

Yet my own feathers were not equal to the task  
Except that my mind was struck by lightning's  
flash, wherein aspiration quit its mask.

—*Paradiso* XXXIII.139–141

The Middle Ages are pervaded by this idea of lightning as destroyer of creature-nature and bearer of divinization. God acts as a bolt of lightning that instantly enlightens us: *In modum fulguris coruscantis*, says Richard of St. Victor (*Benjamin Minor* 82); see also St. Bonaventure and St. Bernard (we experience God as a bolt of lightning: *veluti in velocitate corusci luminis*)<sup>2</sup> and many others.

The exquisite fourteenth-century English used in the *Cloud of Unknowing* says,

Then will he sometimes per adventure send out a beam of ghostly light,  
piercing this cloud of unknowing that is betwixt thee and him, and show  
thee some of his secrets, of which Man may not and cannot speak.<sup>3</sup>

Almost two centuries ago the then unknown Franz von Baader, whom only now some are beginning to appreciate, wrote a book titled *Über den Blitz als Vater des Lichtes* (On lightning as the father of light, 1815). He describes an intuition in which I find a glimpse of the cosmotheandric vision, following not only on what Bacon had already seen in his axiom of *harmonia luminis naturae et gratiae* (harmony between the light of nature and the light of grace), but in which every duality between theism and naturalism is overcome, yet without falling into any monism, either spiritualistic or naturalistic (materialistic).

The duality between nature and spirit is mortal for human life. Man has understood this since he experienced the reality of lightning. Light is a name for God, even in Christianity (1 Jn 1:5ff.), where God is even called the Father of all Lights (Jas 1:17), which was one of Zeus's titles.

<sup>2</sup> *In Cantica*, sermon 41.

<sup>3</sup> *Cloud of Unknowing*, XXVI.5.

At times great thoughts flash in my spirit.

When they appear as lightning they light up my spirit. But they also disappear as lightning and I cannot hold them back.<sup>4</sup>

This is what Franz von Baader wrote in his *Tagebuch* of April 19, 1796.<sup>5</sup> Years later another lover of lightning wrote,

I grew larger than Man and beast; I speak—[but] no one speaks to me. I have grown too solitary and too tall. I wait: but what am I waiting for? The home of clouds is too near—I await the first bolt of lightning.<sup>6</sup>

From the same author I quote by heart another aphorism:

Whoever wishes to be a bolt of lightning some time must be a cloud for a long time.<sup>7</sup>

All of this tells us that lightning, just like fire, can illuminate and destroy, seduce and fascinate, and may be attended by thunder or may leave it behind. I do not think there is any need to explain any of this symbolism. Once again, Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* comes to mind:

Yes! I well know where I come from!  
Never satisfied like a flame  
I burn and am consumed.  
All I touch becomes light,  
Coals are all I leave behind:  
Surely I am a flame.<sup>8</sup>

Using more philosophical terms I would say the following:

The *new innocence* does not depend either on will or comprehension. If I seek it, it is for a reason—for example, because it is good—and then I lose it. If I comprehend it, I have brought it into the field of my reflexive consciousness, and thus I destroy it.

<sup>4</sup> Grosse Gedanken blitzen manchmal in meiner Seele auf, wie Blitze erscheinen sie, es wird wie Helle in ihr. Aber auch wie Blitze schwinden sie hin und ich kann sie noch nicht festhalten.

<sup>5</sup> *Opera Omnia*, ed. F. Hoffman et al., XI.24.

<sup>6</sup> Hochs wuchs ich über Mensch und Tier; / und sprech' ich—niemand spricht mit mir. / Zu einsam wuchs ich und zu hoch—/ Ich warte: worauf wart ich doch? / Zu nah ist mir der Wolken Sitz,—/ Ich warte auf den ersten Blitz (F. Nietzsche, in *Pinie und Blitz*).

<sup>7</sup> Wer einst Blitz werden will, / muss lange Wolke sein!

<sup>8</sup> Ja! Ich weiss, woher ich stamme! / Ungesättigt gleich der Flamme / Glühe und verzehr ich mich / Licht wird alles, was ich fasse, Kohle alles, was ich lasse: / Flamme bin ich sicherlich.



It is a grace, a gift of which we become aware once we have received it—a gift that keeps us in an attitude of constant gratitude, that can accompany us without our even knowing it, but that can never precede us consciously. Neither can it even be a project: it cannot be programmed and will not fit in a computer.

The old innocence (that which we still call innocence, because the new does not name itself) comes before reflection, before the development of the mental into reflection. The new innocence is *metanoia*; it is found beyond the mind, without, however, denying it. Overcoming is not denial.

The new innocence is the third eye. But this eye is not alone. It is a third eye alongside the other two. Just as the other two do not work either separately (dualism) or as a single eye (monism), but rather nondualistically, in natural harmony, the third eye joins with the senses and the intelligence to see things not just in two but in three dimensions.

The new innocence is loving, knowing, walking, talking . . . rather than having loved, known, walked, talked. . . . The known is not known, but has been known—it has been—and this is why when I say I know something, I only remember having known but do not know anymore; I remember having loved but do not love anymore. I live memories, I do not live life, I am not living. The new innocence is the present freed from the past and the future, from the weight of the past and the fear of the future: it is the eternal life that Christ said he came to bring, or to put it better, enabled us to live (Jn 10:10).

The first innocence lost was the loss of ecstatic awareness. We were with things. We swam immersed in them. We were things, and if at times human consciousness was projected on to us, we discovered that we were one more thing among others. We were effective in our contact with things. We fought as equals so that they would reveal their secrets, their connections, or their usefulness. As we identified with them, we transformed them according to their own nature, and we transformed ourselves with them. We were not aware of our human privilege and therefore did not abuse it. We were kings of creation, the kind of kings who fought in the front lines, exposing themselves to defeat by the very power of things. There was total *mystical participation*.

The loss of this innocence is the discovery of the object. Things become objects as consciousness is perceived as subject. And when this consciousness becomes reflective, even the subject becomes another kind of object, no matter how privileged. My knowledge as a subject implies going back and forth from myself as the knowing subject to the known object. The advantages of this are great. Epistemology is born. Criticism becomes possible. But then, when I act as a king of creation, as a privileged object functioning as subject, I lose my good conscience. The innocence is gone.

The new innocence goes beyond the subject/object dichotomy, as well as the internal/external division. In concise terms, it transcends every phenomenology; there are no objects of knowledge, nor is knowledge an object (of knowledge itself). Reality exists in the measure that we ourselves are real, and therefore we get to know it through being part of it. Reality is not our consciousness of it, but our conscious-

ness of it is part of that same reality (which is aware of itself). It is neither realism nor idealism, but possibly realization in the English sense that also embodies a certain Eastern influence: "We realize ourselves when we realize the real in and by the very act of realization."

The new innocence makes it impossible to examine (objectively) nature in the same way that police inspect the house of a presumed drug addict, rummaging through all hiding places to find drugs. I use this example because I do not want to question the good intentions of the inquiry, whether scientific or political.

The new innocence takes part in reality and is aware of the reality of which its own participation is a part. *Sympathy*, in its broadest and most profound meaning, acquires its total justification.

The kingdom of God is the kingdom of justice; passion for justice is probably what we need most in our time, at least if we consider our awareness of institutionalized injustice, because the exploitation of the past has no religious sanction, like the Christian intellectual juggling used to justify slavery and the Crusades, or the Brahmanic attempts to justify outcasts or the rigidity of the caste system.

Only innocence, then, can contribute to justice in an effective and lasting way, which means that all Machiavellisms are ultimately counterproductive. A wish to establish justice in the Middle East for the noninnocent purpose of protecting the interests of oil monopolies will never bring justice to those lands.

In the Hebrew Bible, innocence and justice are related by contrast: "Do not cause the death of the innocent or upright," says one of the precepts of the Jewish Covenant (Ex 23:7), which the Septuagint translates as *athion kai dikaion*, the Vulgate as *innocentem et iustum (non occides)* and Martin Buber as *wer unsträflich und bewährt ist, den darfst du nimmer umbringen helfen* (cf. Dt 27:25, talking about innocent blood). The prophet Daniel also recalls this in his famous defense of Susanna against two elders who accused her (according to the Greek version [Dn 13:53] because the Hebrew text does not include it).

### Blue Lightning

I feel it is important to insist on innocence for a double reason, both moral and ontological.

In the *moral* order it is *urgent* to insist on the nonviolent character that the very name implies: *in-nocens*, that which does no harm. It is the literal translation of *ahimsā*, a word that already seems forgotten.<sup>9</sup> Nonviolence means refusing to do

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. BGX.5 as in the Italian edition translated by Stefano Piano. He is the first I know of the many translators of the *Gītā* to offer this exact literal translation, which correctly explains how *a* stands for "the absence (or suppression) of the desire to harm" (San Paolo: Cinisello Balsamo, 1994), 190. The root *han* means "to do harm, cruelty"—and Gandhi's use of the word as well as the central role of *ahimsā* in Jainism are well known. *Ahimsā*, therefore, means "not hurting, not doing evil, not making suffer, not forcing"—being in-nocent.

violence to the intrinsic dignity of every being, refusing to violate the order of reality. The urgency of this issue in a violent age like ours is obvious.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to recover the value of innocence in the ontological order with regard both to knowledge (*logos*) and to being (*in*).

I offer some suggestions:

God was right: If you eat of the tree in the center of Paradise, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will die. Did Yahweh perhaps mean that if we allow ourselves to be led exclusively by ethics, understood as a rational science of good and evil, we shall die?

Yet neither did the serpent lie: If you eat of this tree your eyes will be opened and you will be like Gods (not like angels, as the Montserrat translation says), knowing good and evil.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, such knowledge in a fragile, contingent subject like Man will turn him into a mortal God; he will not be able to bear the "knowledge" of evil.

[...] caused to grow [...] with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." (Gn 2:9)

\* \* \*

Now that the Man has become like one of us in knowing good from evil, he must not be allowed to reach out his hand and pick from the tree of life, too, and eat and live forever!

—Gn 3:22

He banished the Man, and in front of the garden of Eden he posted the great winged creatures and the fiery flashing sword, to guard the way to the tree of life.

—Gn 3:24

The whole Jewish world knows that innocence was lost through disobeying Yahweh and heeding the voice of the serpent, and this is confirmed—with variations—by virtually all other traditions.

"You shall be like God, knowing good and evil," says the serpent. And all of us, all who are stung by the curiosity to know good and evil, shall choose disobedience.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. ἀγνός, which, as well as pure and sacred, also means innocent. Cf. *Plat. Leg. 6* (759a). And for ἀθῶος, innocent, cf. Mt 27:4 as well as Gn 24:41; Nb 5; 19:31; Ex 23:7, etc. The word ἀθῶος comes from ἀ-θῶή, which literally means "not causing evil (neither chastising nor causing pain)."

<sup>11</sup> Gn 3:5. The Vulgate says, "sicut dii"; the Septuagint, ὡς θεοὶ and Martin Buber translates, "Ihr werdet wie Gott, erkennend Gut und Böse."

We shall know good and evil; we shall lose our innocence. Adam's decision is still ours. Like him we have lost innocence.<sup>12</sup>

The loss of innocence consists in choosing the tree of knowledge and forgetting the tree of life.<sup>13</sup> Only God—a totally pure heart—can understand without knowing good and evil. God and the serpent both told us the truth, and this is the human condition: to be between the divine and the cosmic (it is no coincidence that the serpent crawls on the earth).

The old innocence has been lost, just as it is lost today: through knowledge separated from love, through lack of respect for mystery.

Mystery is given by transcendence, by something that transcends Man, by the incomprehensible. The divine commandment is the voice of transcendence: "You shall not eat of that tree." But Man discovers that the fruit can be eaten, that it is possible to do what is forbidden. Man wants to develop his potential, to do all that is within his power. This is the strongest temptation of techno-science: to do all that is possible. Why should modern science put aside the fusion of the atom, the manipulation of genes, the multiplication of its power? Why would God, who has given Man these possibilities, now want to castrate his desire for knowledge? Perhaps the serpent was right in saying that people would become like Gods, but mortal Gods and bearers of mortality.

Man eats the apple, splits the atom, isolates the genes, accelerates the rhythms . . . and discovers himself naked, insecure, vulnerable, and launched forth at incalculable speed. Man thus turns into a subject dependent on the object of his knowledge. Such is the knowledge of good and evil. It is a knowledge that judges, because objective knowledge cannot avoid doing so. It is not the knowledge that becomes one with the thing known, because the human knowledge that can know everything cannot be everything, since Man is limited and contingent.

Human knowledge is irreversible; innocence cannot be recovered. Neither can or will so-called Christian redemption take us back to the first Paradise. History cannot be replayed, even for a God. There are no laws for reality; it is always new.

Can there be a new innocence? What God would tell us that we shall not know ourselves unless we move away from the tree of science? And even if we believed in Him we would deny Him the right to keep us in ignorance, like an ancient despot with his people. This is why I say there cannot be a second innocence, and nostalgia for the first not only does not restore it to us but makes us even unhappier.

<sup>12</sup> Hegel comments on Socrates (*Werke* 14.49), "Die Frucht des Baums der Erkenntnis des Guten und Bösen, der Erkenntnis, das ist die Vernunft aus sich—das allgemeine Prinzip der Philosophie für alle folgende Zeiten" (The fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, of knowledge, that is of reason itself—is the general principle of philosophies for all times to come).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the little-known but profound reflections by Lev Šestov, in his work *Athens and Jerusalem* (1951, originally in Russian; German translation—München 1994), 163–79.

This is the problem.

The new innocence must be so new that it does not lament the loss of the first: Man has lost that experience, and when you explain it to him he has no desire for it. We do not wish, and we are not able, to give up our knowledge of good and evil; we have come to think of ourselves as Gods because we live in a world where God does not really play any divine role. Scientific cosmology, in which much of the world believes, has turned God into a superfluous hypothesis relegated, at best, to the intimate realm of the individual. A strong and meaningful theism would be intolerable. This is the crisis of monotheism, of which Islam is probably the most striking example. But the tame, caged theism of a modern world dominated by techno-science could not be tolerated by a God, no matter how many theological stunts we may perform: the omnipotent God is dead. The Latin translation of the first Christian symbols of the creed caused (in a complicated manner) many misunderstandings: *omnipotens* does not have the same overtone as *pantokrator*.

What, then, does a new innocence mean? Could it be that in speaking about it we are already destroying it? Undoubtedly so—yet this is also one of its features. We can talk about the new innocence even though it eludes knowledge of good and evil. It is something that we constantly lose and regain. It can be talked about only in the past tense; the memory of it opens our eyes and makes us see that it existed, but memory itself keeps it alive when our hearts are pure.

The new innocence does not trust reason. The traditional way of saying it is through the well-known and much-distorted claim that faith will save us, resurrect us, and give us eternal life, allowing us to eat from the tree of life.

What does all this mean?

First, we should not continue eating from the tree of knowledge as though it were the tree of salvation. It is not a matter of despising reason but of being rationally skeptical, not placing all our faith in it and opening our third eye (which is more than just the *tertium genus cognitionis* of Spinoza's intuition). There is a qualitative difference between the first and second degrees of "knowledge," but an even greater one between the second and the third. If the first eye gives us faith in what our senses "show" us, and the second in what reason "tells" us, the third represents the faith we have in reality itself (*sine glossa*, without interpretation). Wisdom is the human attitude that does not place its faith in knowledge but in a pure heart, whose purity includes intellectual transparency. Only the innocent can be free—free from the kingdom of necessity (*anagke*) and universality (*katholon*). Liberty is not "anarchy" (*anarchia*) but "idiosyncrasy" (*idiosykrasia*). It is not a rejection of every principle but the discovery of one's own value, and that discovery requires mystical experience.

The great emperor Wu, having spent all his life serving the Buddhist cause and practicing Buddhism, went personally to meet the founder of Zen, the master Bodhidharma, and asked what would be his reward. The laconic reply was, "No reward."

The new innocence is the human attitude that expects no reward, does not imagine there may be a reward, and does not think about it or need it; if such reward

existed, in fact, it would destroy such innocence and transform life into a means to achieve an end other than life itself.

This is what many mystics mean when they tell us to act without a wherefore and live in the present.

It is not a question of giving up the reward—of being so perfect as to renounce our well-deserved recompense. This is the great spiritual danger: rationality on one side and irrationality on the other. It is a question of not even feeling the need for rewards.

All innocence is paradisiacal. Because the innocent, who is without doubt, malice or suspicion, is like primitive or ancient Man, wrapped in nature, in cosmic scenery, in a garden—and this is Paradise. Doubt takes Man away from Paradise, from external reality.

—Ortega y Gasset, *Obras completas*, VII.388/389

We cannot return to this innocence. Yet nothing says we cannot have a new innocence.

This new innocence is not the fruit of a romantic nostalgia for Paradise; it includes *skepsis* and criticism while removing the sting of anguished doubt.

The inability to live in insecurity and risk demonstrates a lack of spiritual maturity and intellectual depth.

The new innocence asks one of the major questions of the modern world: Should human life be guided by reason? As I have said many times, although reason holds veto power, it does not have the function of directing the course of human actions.

What force remains then to direct our actions? The traditional answer is almost universal: love.

The new innocence is spontaneous—but not all spontaneity is innocent, only what comes from a pure heart. The pure of heart not only shall see God, but they do see Him or, rather, they see reality, that is to say, Being.

The new innocence is so totally new that it is not the second edition of anything at all. It arises out of Un-Nothingness. Therefore, from the inside it cannot be differentiated from the first. As most Oriental traditions tell us, after enlightenment, mountains and streams go back to being mountains and streams; we realize that we have neither lost nor gained anything, that we cannot gain or lose access to *samādhi*, that we were already *brahman*, that the farmer returns to the market, and so on.

From the outside, however, the difference is obvious. Only after having come through the fire of trial, after losing innocence (the first), do we reach the new one. Yet when we do reach it, as the Gospels tell us, we are like the mother who forgets her labor pains when she sees her child lying next to her.

From Mengzi (Mencius) and Confucius up to a certain Buddhist tradition, the East deals richly with this issue, from Nāgārjuna's more speculative writings to the syncretistic commentaries of Teshima Toan (1718–1786), or a popular work by Ikkyū Sōjun (1394–1481), *The Water Mirror*. This tradition can be found everywhere,

and we could quote the *Upaniṣad*, the *Tao Te Ching*, or even the Gospels: "Let not your left hand know what your right hand is doing," "the widow's penny," "the tax collector and the Pharisee," and so on.

What do they say? That the original, native spirit that inhabits Man is more ancient than thought, precedes reflection, and is also free from any reference to the ego: it is pure spontaneity, doing things from a deep impulse, preceding the reflections of the mind and the motivation of the will. We must reach a level of consciousness that is free from conceptualization. Actions should be performed without premeditation or calculation. The Japanese or Chinese languages, for example, are capable of richer shades of meaning than Western languages. Therefore, the issue is not one of irrationality nor ingenuous optimism. Only a pure heart can afford to be spontaneous; only those who seek nothing can be free; only those who have purified their minds can overcome the mental; only the original Spirit (*honshin*) can think freely (*omou*) and see without looking, and so forth.

My friend Abe Masao, one of the great contemporary exponents of Zen, ended an important article on this subject by saying we can reach Zen only by transcending both speech and silence, affirmation and negation. His concluding sentence, however, asked with clear Shakespearean overtones, "But what is beyond speech and silence, beyond affirmation and negation? That is the question."

No, that is not the question. And if it were, it would be a contradiction and, therefore, irrational.

But if it is not the question, that does not mean the question is another, just that this is not the question, that there is no such question, that it does not exist, that it is not real (but is an extrapolation of the mind).

To such a question there is no answer except a resolution, an undoing, a dissolving, when we do not ask it because it does not exist. That is what makes the new innocence.

The new innocence does not ask the question; it never has. The new innocence arises after dissolving the question.

"Know thyself," reads the frontispiece of the temple in Delphi. This phrase could only come from a God. The imperative implies the speaker is aware that Man does not know himself.

Yet only a God knows that such a commandment is impossible. No one can know himself completely. The knower would become the known. It would be the death of Man. Self-omniscience would mean the destruction of the human condition and the loss of human identity.

If I knew all about myself, if I were transparent to myself, if I were like an angel, if none of my motivations were unknown to me, if nothing of what I am were obscure to me, then there would be no risk in my life, nothing would surprise me, nothing would enchant me and fill me with wonder. Since I would know myself for what I am, have my own being in mind, know all that belongs to me, the future could not reveal anything, nor could life show me anything new. I would not have freedom.

However, this ignorance is fertile; since the times of the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Upaniṣads*, there has been repeated appreciation of "learned ignorance," the "cloud

of unknowing," *"toda ciencia trascendiendo,"* and so on. This ignorance is the door to the new innocence.

In fact, if I know that I cannot know myself completely, if I have acknowledged the corrosive effect of intelligence without love, if I know there are questions and shadows in my life, if I know that I am not nor will ever be absolutely certain about anything, then I begin to be a human and not an angel; I discover that I have to trust something or someone who is not me; I begin to see myself as a constitutive relationship; I begin to understand that without faith we would all die or we could not live, as both Isaiah (7:9) and the *Gītā* (17:3) have already said.

We now discover that the *logos*, even the most powerful and infinite, is not everything—that there is more to our lives than just reason and will, that the divine mystery is more than the *logos*.

A psalm sung by a mystic can help to express this: "*Ad nihilum redactus sum, et nescivi*" (I am reduced to nothingness and did not know) (Ps 72 [73]:22).

Miguel de Molinos cites it in his *Guía Espiritual* (III.20 [194]), and adds,

*Estándote en la nada, cerrarás la puerta a todo lo que no es Dios; te retirarás aun de ti misma y caminarás a aquella interior soledad. . . . Anégate en la nada. . . .*

Being in nothingness, you will close the door to all that is not God; you will retreat even from yourself and walk toward that interior solitude. . . . Drown in nothingness. . . .

This psalm is quite different from the original, in both Greek and the Hebrew versions. The new Latin version, recommended by Pius XII, says, "*Ego eram neque intellegebam*" (Foolish was I and did not understand), while the Greek says, "Καγὼ ἐξουθενώμενος, καὶ οὐκ ἔγνων."<sup>14</sup>

The various modern versions are rather interesting.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Naturally, the Greek opposed the negation οὐδέ (ἐξουθενέω and ἐξουθενόω), so the verb, which currently means, contempt or mocking, actually means "annihilation, reduction to nothing."

<sup>15</sup> "This led David unwittingly to perfect annihilation." "Ad nihilum redactus sum, et nescivi," says Molinos, quoting the Vulgate: "Et ego ad nihilum redactus sum et nescivi, ut iumentum factus sum apud te." The modern translations are:

- Jo era incapaç d'entendrerlo. (BC)
- Moi, stupide, je ne comprenais pas. (BJ)
- I would not understand, so brutish was I. (NEB)
- I was vile and knew not. (from the Septuagint)
- So foolish was I, and ignorant. (RV & King James)
- Dumm war ich und erkannte nicht. (Buber)
- Da war ich voll Torheit und ohne Einsicht. (Stenzel)



But more interesting is the mystical use of the psalm and what the modern translations make of it.

To cite another example, the modern translations of 2 Co 10:10 and Mk 9:12 avoid the possible "nihilist" interpretation. We fear nothingness.

Could it be that the innocent are those who do not fear nothingness?

The Vulgate shows us a relationship between annihilation and not knowing, but it is in this not knowing that we find freedom. When we are something, unknowing is deadly. When we are nothing, unknowing is liberating.

The use of the same verb in quoting Isaiah's prophecy (52:13; 53:12), with reference to Jesus, is also very significant: "Yet how is it that the scriptures say about the Son of Man that he must suffer grievously and be treated with contempt?" (Mk 9:12).<sup>16</sup>

We have never had a theology of *kenosis*.

Paracelsus wrote, and Kant repeated it in his own way, that if Man had stayed in Paradise, he would have remained in a purely animal state. He would have never become the "image of God."

The animals, in fact, were not expelled from Paradise, and, in a sense, they are still there. The earth is their Paradise. Man has not completely assimilated. There is something more in him. And he would not have realized this—he would never have discovered it, never reached it—if he had remained in Paradise.

If Paradise is the state of nature and of pure nature, Man is not pure nature, but something more. He has left Paradise.

In leaving Paradise, however, he has in some ways lost his animality, his naturality, and therefore the co-naturality with things and with good. If one temptation would be wanting to go back and recover the old innocence, the other would be to alienate ourselves from nature, to feel superior to it and see ourselves as absolute monarchs over it. Both these extremes dehumanize us.

Man is this middle way between Being and Nothingness, as almost all traditions have said: Man stands between heaven and earth.

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\* Es porque era necio y no sabia nada. (Nacar-Colunga)

\* Estupido de mi, no comprendia nada. (Martin Nieto)

[The *Neue Jerusalem Bibel* glosses over it, quoting in a footnote at Jb 40:15]

<sup>16</sup> Πολλὰ πάθη καὶ ἐξουδενηθῇ (Septuagint); *quomodo scriptum est super Filio hominis, ut multa patiat et contemnatur* (Vulgate). Old English says it clearly: "He must suffer many things and be set at nought" (King James and RV); "to be treated with contempt" is the toned-down NEB translation. I prefer the Catalan interconfessional Bible: "ha de patir molt; ha de ser tingun per no res."



## THE NEW INNOCENCE

Contemporary Western Man, bereft of traditional cultural and religious support, increasingly perceives himself as living in an alienating and alienated universe whose center is no longer a merely transcendent godhead, or the cosmos, or even himself. Lacking a spatial focal point, he attempts to locate this center in the future, which has become for many the modern symbol of transcendence. All the futuristic utopias so common nowadays are just signs of this very search.<sup>1</sup> The crisis is profound, but dreams for the future cannot save those who will die in the meantime. Half measures and palliatives will not do. Only a radical *metanoia*—a complete turning of mind, heart, and spirit—can meet our needs.<sup>2</sup>

It is simply not enough, for example, to tax those who foolishly exhaust our natural resources or to penalize companies that pollute our coastlines. Nor is it enough merely to teach children to be kind to living things or to encourage adults to become conscious of ecological problems. However important such measures may

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the spirituality of the "omega point" in Teilhard de Chardin (*The Future of Man* [New York: Harper, 1964], and *The Divine Milieu* [New York: Harper, 1960], 112–49), and the theory of God as "absolute Zukunft" in Karl Rahner (*Schriften zur Theologie* 6 [Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1965], 78–88). And *The Communist Manifesto* proclaims, "In place of the old society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (II, end).

<sup>2</sup> Sentences like the following are rather topical nowadays: "Nothing short of such a transformation will keep the human race from sliding back still further into barbarism" (L. Mumford, *The Conduct of Life* [New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1951], 4); "This is now regarded as a very irreligious age. But perhaps it only means that the mind is moving from one state to another. The next stage is not a belief in many Gods. It is not a belief in one God. It is not a belief at all—not a conception in the intellect. It is an extension of consciousness so that we *may feel God*, or, if you will, an experience of harmony, an intimation of the Divine, which will link us again with *animism*, the experience of unity lost at the dawn of self-consciousness. This will atone for our sin (which means separation); it will be our at-one-ment" (J. S. Collins [*apud* W. Berry, "A Secular Pilgrimage"]. In *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*, ed. I. G. Barbour [Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1973], 138–39); "Yes, we need change, but change so fundamental and far-reaching that the concepts of revolution and freedom must be expanded beyond all earlier horizons" (Ecology Action East, "The Power to Destroy, the Power to Create," in Barbour, *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*, 248).

be, they ultimately treat only the symptoms. A radical change is required—not so much a new policy of Man *toward* Nature, but rather a total conversion capable of recognizing and reappropriating a common destiny. For how long shall mankind and the world remain in enmity? Maybe for as long as we shall insist on correlating them as master to slave—to follow the metaphor used by Hegel and Marx? As long as their relationship is not considered as constitutive of both world and Man, no lasting remedy will ever be found. For this reason I suggest that no dualistic solution can be lasting; it is not just a question of considering nature as an extension of man's body, for example, but rather of gaining—perhaps for the first time on a global scale—a new innocence. This is the challenge that our contemporary ecological predicament forces us to face. It does not involve only (or even primarily) the issues of environmental pollution, overpopulation, or resource conservation—vital as these are. It extends far beyond the boundaries of the rich countries and the problems of industrialization; it is a global development. For this reason, technological solutions alone, however urgent, will not suffice. Nor can the solution be imposed through dictatorial or totalitarian methods, which would stifle human dynamism and personal freedom by coercive or unnatural means. We need to find an ontonomic order that can take full charge of the overall problem without neglecting the needs of regional ontologies.<sup>3</sup>

As an example of the global horizon people feel is necessary in order to face our present predicament, we might consider the interesting shift that has occurred in the self-understanding of modern Christians. Not so very long ago, exclusivity and novelty were sure signs of truth, in both the traditional Abrahamic religions and in the modern secularized realms of science and art. Christians excelled in this: Creation *ex nihilo* was seen as the exclusively Judeo-Christian contribution; grace as a rule was to be found only in Christianity; love of one's enemies was supposed to be exclusively Christian; salvation lay in Christianity alone; the sacraments were the only means of salvation; *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*; and so forth. Today, almost the opposite is the case. Christian theologians now emphasize that the biblical myths are universal because they embody the human condition, that Jesus is Lord because he is a universal figure, the Man for all, and so on. Likewise, modern Westerners point out that science is true because it has no nationality, that art is beautiful because beauty is for all mankind, not only for a privileged few. However provincial modern Man

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<sup>3</sup> This has been clearly demonstrated in connection with the vital issue of development by D. Goulet in his *The Cruel Choice* (New York: Atheneum, 1971): "When famine, disease and ignorance can be eliminated, it is morally wrong to perpetuate them. And no justification exists for preserving old values if these buttress social privilege, exploitation, superstition and escapism. Furthermore, men's cognitive horizons ought not to be limited to tradition on grounds that new knowledge is troubling" (249). The author, however, does not minimize the difficulties at hand: "The important issue, ultimately, is this: the possibility of cultural diversity needs to be safeguarded by deliberate policies. Perplexing questions arise when it must be decided which cultural peculiarities are to be allowed and which eliminated when these interfere with development" (269–70).

may be, he abhors elitism, and the great majority pay homage or at least lip service to those who struggle against apartheid, racism, discrimination—in short, against any limitation of those rights that are considered universal.

We could describe our present moment in a more philosophical and mythical language and speak of the conquest of a second innocence. Let me explain. The first *kairological* moment in the history of human consciousness could be called the *ecstatic moment*.<sup>4</sup> Man simply knows. He knows the mountains and the rivers, he knows good and evil, what is pleasurable and what is unpleasant. Male knows female and vice versa. Man knows Nature and also knows his God and the Gods. He stumbles and he errs, but he allows himself to be corrected by things. Man learns, above all, through obedience, that is, by listening (*ob-audire*) to the rest of reality that speaks to him. In the ecstatic attitude the mind is primarily passive.

A second moment follows: the *enstatic moment* of human intelligence. Man becomes aware that he knows, that he is a knowing being, and this reflexive knowledge, like original sin, will sooner or later expel Man from Paradise.<sup>5</sup> In Paradise, what is good is good, pure and simple: an apple is an apple. Man's approach is straightforward. He does not desire to be "other" or "more" than what he is; indeed, in fact there is no room for anything else. Man exhausts his knowledge in knowing the object. Little wonder, then, that idol worship—which I would prefer to call iconolatry, in the positive sense of the word—is all that remains of this primordial moment, the remnant of man's paradisiac dwelling.<sup>6</sup> In worshipping the icon, Man is unself-conscious, as he is totally absorbed in honoring and praising the symbol of the divine. For him, the theophany is so perfect that he cannot discover any differ-

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<sup>4</sup> I call these moments "kairological" and not chronological to stress their qualitative character. This does not preclude that there is a chronological sequence of these three moments within a single culture, nor that there are living civilizations that coexist in space and yet are temporally diachronical. Nevertheless these moments may be called kairological because they present a markedly temporal character and even a certain historical sequence, even though they do not follow the sequential pattern of linear and quantifiable time logically or even dialectically.

<sup>5</sup> This is a traditional idea in Judaism and Christianity, although defended mainly in gnostic and mystical circles. It has been revived by such contemporary authors as R. C. Zaehner, *The Convergent Spirit* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 44ff., who characterizes original sin as marking "the emergence of Man into full consciousness" (61). Cf. also P. Ricoeur in *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), who says, "The Yahvist [author of Genesis] would seem to have suppressed all the traits of discernment or intelligence connected with the state of innocence, and to have assigned all of man's cultural attitudes to his fallen state. The creation-man becomes, for him, a sort of child-man, innocent in every sense of the word, who had only to stretch out his hands to gather the fruits of the wonderful garden, and who was awakened sexually only after the fall and in shame. Intelligence, work and sexuality, then, would be the flowers of evil" (24).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. R. Panikkar, "Betrachtung über die monotheistischen und polytheistischen Religionen," in *Die vielen Götter und der eine Herr* (Weilheim Oberbayern: O.W. Barth, 1963), 43–51.

ence between the *epiphany* and the *theos* manifested in it, between the symbol and what it symbolizes. And this makes the worshipper an idolater in the eyes of a more sophisticated (no longer innocent) outsider.

In other words, initially what I have called elsewhere *the symbolic difference* is not conscious.<sup>7</sup> The symbolic difference manifests itself only on the existential level, inasmuch as Man continues to live and worship, without memory of his previous acts. Subsequently, however in the reflective moment, Man realizes that the symbol both is and is not the thing. It is the thing because there is nothing in itself or outside the symbol. Yet the symbol is not the thing, but precisely the symbol of the thing. When Man sees in the apple something other than the apple, he is on the verge of losing his innocence. As a matter of fact, when primordial Man *sees* the apple, he sees in the apple the entire universe—not as something other than apple, but as *apple*. Reflexive thinking confronts Man, first of all, with the self-conscious knowledge that he is aware of knowing. He becomes aware not only of the apple but of the fact that he knows the apple. In the second place, this makes him aware that knowing the apple is not all there is to knowing, since he is at least aware that he knows, and therefore that knowing the apple does not exhaust his knowledge. In other words, he becomes aware of the limits of his thinking, and therefore of his own limitations. Thus he consoles himself by declaring that only now does he know the apple as a conceptual “apple.” The *identity* of the apple, on which his entire destiny once depended, becomes the *identification* of the “apple”—about which he can say many things, except what the apple ultimately is. Differentiation begins. Man discovers that the “apple” is only one “thing.” It may be a beautiful symbol but is not the only one, and specifically it is not the “symbolized”—but only its symbol. The symbolic difference has become an *ontological separation*. The apple alone is no longer satisfactory, because Man also wants to know the non-apple; even more, he wants to know more than both apple and non-apple. Ultimately he wants to know everything—that is, God, which here stands for totality. Only then does he understand the temptation of wanting to be like God, because only then does he know himself as non-God. And although he may have heard that he is also not-yet God, he does not have the patience to wait and become God at the end of his earthly pilgrimage. He wants to become like God now, and so he heeds the serpent who presents the non-apple that Man intuitively perceives in the “apple.” It seems that Man must eat the apple, enjoy and destroy it, sacrifice it, in order to reach what he now realizes is the meaning of the apple. This search for all that is hidden in the apple characterizes the second moment of human consciousness, the sacrifice of innocence.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For a consideration of the symbolic difference in terms of liturgy, cf. R. Panikkar, *Worship and Secular Man* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973), chap. 1, esp. 20–21.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. as a single example of the pervasiveness of such an attitude the following statement written in 1951 by such a man of action as Dag Hammarskjöld: “All of a sudden, the Earthly Paradise from which we have been excluded by our knowledge”; by our *reflective knowledge* would be my friendly amendment. But some paragraphs later, when I assume

The third kairological moment does not aim at recovering this lost innocence. Innocence is innocent precisely because once "spoiled" it cannot be regained. We cannot return to an earthly paradise, however much we may want to do so. Here the very desire proves to be the greatest difficulty, just as longing for *nirvāṇa* constitutes the greatest obstacle in attaining it. On the other hand, if we desire not to desire—longing not to long, because we have realized that only nondesire is the way—this attitude becomes self-defeating since it is only another desire, no matter how sophisticated.

The third moment is not a reaction but a conquest, the difficult and painful conquest of a new innocence.<sup>9</sup> It will not do to turn back, nor can we forge ahead indefinitely and rashly. We cannot go back, acting as if we did not know that we know, when in fact we do know. Such awareness that we are sentient beings makes pure knowledge impossible—unless or until we become the absolute knower who, through self-knowledge, knows all beings and all knowledge.<sup>10</sup> But for the time being we cannot say anything about a knower without destroying it, both as a knower (for it would then become the known) and as an absolute (for we would reduce it to our own knowing).<sup>11</sup> The first innocence is gone forever.

Neither can we push ahead indefinitely; we cannot pretend that we have a solid and valid knowledge of anything, when we know only too well that we ignore the foundation on which such first knowledge rests. In other words, we cannot pretend that we know and stop there, as if this were absolute knowledge, because we also know that we do not know. And if we really know that we do not know the foundation on which our knowledge rests, this means that we do not even know the truth of what we know—because this truth depends upon something unknown. We only know our ignorance of the foundations of our knowledge. Now, to be precise, such knowledge of our ignorance is neither ignorance nor knowledge. It is not ignorance, for it knows. It is not knowledge, for it has no object; it knows no-thing. We cannot

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the author was not making any conscious connection with the first sentence, he writes, "A humility which never makes comparisons, never rejects what there is for the sake of something 'else' or something 'more'" (*Markings* [New York: Knopf, 1964], 71).

<sup>9</sup> Is this not the meaning of "whoever does not accept the Kingdom of God as a child will never enter it" (Mk 10:15)? And is it not this new innocence that makes sense of "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Mt 5:3)? Cf. this later comment in *Markings*: "Maturity: among other things, a new lack of self-consciousness—the kind you can only attain when you have become entirely indifferent to yourself through an absolute assent to your fate" (90).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. a text dating back at least two millennia (Aristotle's *Metaphysics* XIII.9), "Intendit ostendere quod Deus non intelligit aliud, sed seipsum, in quantum est perfectio intelligentis, et eius quod est intelligere" (D. Thomas, In *Metaph.* lect. 11, n. 2614). Or again: "[Deus] intelligit autem omnia alia a se intelligendo seipsum, in quantum ipsius esse est universalis radix intelligendi, omnem intelligentiam comprehendens" (D. Thomas, *De subst. separat.* 13, ed. Madonnet, 12, commenting on the same text of Aristotle).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the metaphysical speculations of the *noēsis noēseōs* of Aristotle, the *svayamprakāśa* of the *vedānta*, and the theology of light of the Scholastics.

know ignorance as such; we cannot know the unknown. If we could, it would cease to be ignorance; it would become known. This knowledge of our ignorance, then, knows that our knowing does not exhaust knowledge—not because we know ignorance, but because we know that others may have a different knowledge from ours and they have sometimes convinced us that theirs was right. Such knowledge of our limitations is not a direct knowledge but an awareness born of a conflict of knowledges, a conflict that we cannot resolve. We are forced to overcome knowledge by nonknowledge, by a leap of . . . faith, trust, feeling, intuition.

The new innocence means overcoming the intellectual despair that ensues when we discover that we cannot break out of this loop. We cannot do this by an act of the intellect. Neither can we do it by sheer willpower, for will is too infected by the intellect to maintain such an autonomy. Even if we consciously try to overcome this predominance of the intellect by an act of will, nonetheless it is the intellect that directs and inspires that very act. Once we have discovered the antinomies in which we are entangled, we would like to jump over the walls of the prison or escape from this vale of tears, this suffering world, or whatever dialectical impasse. No one tries, or even wants, to climb over walls that do not exist. In the state of innocence, heaven has no gates. In the fallen state, hell is gateless. The new innocence does not claim to abolish either the gates of heaven or those of hell; on the other hand, it does not long to cross either threshold. It remains in the *antariksa*, in the *metaxy*, in the space in between, the positive middle, the *aion*, the *saeculum*, the world of temporal life, neither dreading the realm below nor lured by the kingdom above.<sup>12</sup>

The new innocence does not recapture the lost innocence. The unself-conscious attitude of concentrated attention has little to do with the self-forgetfulness of dissipated distraction. This condition was traditionally expressed by saying that Man, having fallen, had not completely lost his *status*, was not completely corrupted but only "wounded" or, as the Scholastics liked to say, *vulneratus in naturalibus et expoliatus ex supernaturalibus*. So there is in Man a kernel that allows for a genuine regeneration, something more than a simple work of repair. This core enables the third moment to take place, and at this depth the new innocence is found.

Only redemption can engender the new innocence. Whatever existential form this redemption may take, it is marked by the experience of the limitations of our consciousness. Finding the limits of reason has ever been the business of philosophers, but the limits of which we today are increasingly aware are not only the principle of noncontradiction as the lower limit, and the supernatural (or the mystery) as the upper limit, but also the limits intrinsic to consciousness itself. It is the experience that thinking not only reveals and conceals but also destroys when

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<sup>12</sup> I could formulate this same insight in a more philosophical way, drawing on Kierkegaard, Feuerbach, Elmer, and Buber to say that truth is essentially relational, that only the experience of the "thou" opens us up, not only to that of the ego, but also to that of the object, of the external world. Or, as I have tried to say elsewhere, the dialogical dialogue finds its justification not in terms of pragmatic reasons but because the very structure of reality is polar.



carried to the extreme. Augustine's familiar words concerning time<sup>13</sup> are more than a figure of speech: the ultimate values of human life are deflated the moment reflexive consciousness reflects on them. We can meaningfully operate with the concepts of God, justice, patriotism, love, abortion, and more (to give examples from various spheres) as long as we do not think them through, as long as we respect the myth (because we still believe in it) woven with the *logos* that articulates these concepts. The new innocence binds itself to a new myth. And the new myth cannot be spelled out; it is not yet *logos*. We see through it, we live it.

I suggest that we can discover three kairological moments in the history of man's consciousness:

1. The *primordial* or ecumenical moment, that prereflexive attitude in which nature, Man, and the divine are still amorphously mixed and only vaguely differentiated.
2. The *humanistic* or economic moment, that historical attitude in which the process of differentiation and individualization proceeds from the macrosphere to the microsphere.
3. The moment of the *new innocence*, the cosmotheandric moment that maintains the distinctions of the second moment without forfeiting the unity of the first.

Here I want to describe briefly this holistic experience without, however, going into all its underlying assumptions or spelling out all its implications for our current situation. As we have said, the new innocence implies a new myth and a new vision. Underlying both is the cosmotheandric principle, which asserts that the divine, the human, and the earthly—or however we may prefer to call them—are the three irreducible dimensions that constitute the real, that is, any reality inasmuch as it is real. The cosmotheandric principle does not deny that the abstracting power of our mind may, for particular and limited purposes, consider parts of reality as independent; it does not deny the complexity of the real and its many degrees. The principle reminds us that the parts are parts and that they are not just accidentally juxtaposed but essentially related to the whole. In other words, the parts are real *participations*. They are to be understood not as a merely spatial model—as books that are part of a library, or as a carburetor and a differential gear that are parts of an automobile—but rather according to an organic unity, as body and soul, or mind and will, belong to the human being; they are parts because they are not the whole, but they are not parts that can be “parted” from the whole without ceasing to participate in it. A soul without a body is a mere entelechy; a body without a soul, a corpse; a will without reason, a mere abstraction; and reason without will, an artificial concoction of the mind, and so on.

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<sup>13</sup> “What then is time? If nobody asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to someone who asks, I don’t know” (*Confess.* XI.14).

The human, divine, and earthly dimensions constitute a whole. That whole cannot be reduced to any of its constituents.

This intuition does not claim that these three dimensions are three modes of a monolithic, undifferentiated reality, nor does it say that they are three elements in a pluralistic system. Rather one, though intrinsically threefold, relationship expresses the ultimate constitution of reality. Everything that exists, any real human being, presents this triune structure expressed in three dimensions. I am not only saying that everything is directly or indirectly related to everything else—as in the radical relativity or *pratītyasamutpāda* of the Buddhist tradition. I am also stressing that this relationship is not only constitutive of the whole but that it shines through, ever new and vital, in every spark of the real. The cosmotheandric intuition is not a tripartite division of beings but an insight into the threefold core of all that is, insofar as it is.

Perhaps a *maṇḍala*—a circle—will help us to symbolize this intuition. There is no circle without a center and a circumference. The three are not the same thing, yet they are not separable. The circumference is not the center, but without the center, the circumference would not be. The circle, in itself invisible, is neither the circumference nor the center point, yet it is circumscribed by the one and implies the other. The center does not depend on the circle or the circumference, since it is a point without dimensions, yet it would not be the center—or anything at all in this context—without the other two. The circle, visible only through the circumference, is matter, energy, the world—and this is so because the circumference, Man, consciousness, encompasses it. And both of these are what they are because there is a God, a center, which alone, as God, is—as the ancients loved to say—a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.<sup>14</sup>

What can we say about the complete *maṇḍala*? We should distinguish the divine, the human, and the cosmic: the center should not be confused with the circumference, nor the circumference with the circle, but we cannot allow separation. After all, the circumference is the center, “expanded”; the circle is the circumference “filled”; and the center acts as the very “seed” of the other two. There is a *circumincessio*, a *perichōresis* of the three.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The phrase apparently first occurs in the twelfth-century pseudo-hermetic *Liber XXIV Philosophorum* (prop. 2): “Deus est sphaera infinita, cuius centrum est ubique, circumferentia nusquam.” This is the source for Eckhart and, after him, Nicholas of Cusa. Cf. the interesting “variation” given by Alain of Lille (*Regulae theologicae*): “Deus est sphaera intelligibilis, cuius centrum ubique, circumferentia nusquam.” For a further consideration of the metaphor, which was later applied to the universe by Pascal, cf. K. Harries, “The Infinite Sphere: Comments on the History of a Metaphor,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (January 1975): 5–15.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Jn 10:30–38; 14:9ff.; 17:21; 20:19ff., and also the words of Augustine: “Ita et singula sunt in singulis et omnia in singulis et singula in omnibus et omnia in omnibus et unum in omnia” (*De Trinitate* VI.10.12; *PL* 42.932), or elsewhere: “At in illis tribus cum se novit mens et amat se, manet trinitas, mens, amor, notitia; et nulla commixtione

In the ecumenical phase of human consciousness, the cosmos acted as the center. Because this attitude was ecstatic it could be cosmocentric, for Man was not totally aware of himself and his special position in the universe. Thinking was mainly a passive activity—precisely because Man thought it was passive. But when Man becomes aware that the world is not the center, he also begins to look for the real center and the real circumference. This moment marks the transitional phase of theocentric conceptions, until Man finally realizes that it is he who has enthroned God in and as the center.

In the economic phase, Man progressively becomes the center. This enstatic moment was bound to become anthropocentric, because Man was conscious of being the measure of all things and thus of his central position in the universe. The thinker became active by the very fact that Man became conscious of his mental activity. But, as he becomes aware of the different parts of the circumference, he discovers that he is not on a straight line and so begins to look for a possible center—or centers—of the curvature. No wonder this problematic center was sought in a multitude of ways and not easily found, for one segment of the circumference yields a different center from that which can be calculated from any other sector of the circumference. Apparently we are not all on the same circumference, until we go far enough . . . and share the same mythical horizon.

The cosmotheandric vision, then, does not gravitate around a single point, and in this sense it has no center. The human, divine, and cosmic dimensions coexist; they are interrelated and may be hierarchically constituted or coordinated—as ontological priorities must be—but they cannot be singled out, for this would annihilate them.

In conclusion, the cosmotheandric vision characterizes the third moment, the new innocence, which itself appears as an unbelievable faith in a center that is not in God, nor in the cosmos, nor even in Man. It is a moving center that can be only found in the intersection of the three.

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confunditur quamvis et singula sint in se ipsis et invicem in totis, sive singula in binis sive bina in singulis, itaque omnia in omnibus" (*De Trinitate* IX.5; *PL* 42.965).



## 2

# THE CONTEMPLATIVE SPIRIT

## *A Challenge to Modernity*

Contemplation is an ambivalent word. I do not intend to say what contemplation is or how it may be defined, but I would like to remark on a constant: contemplation is something definitive, something connected with the very purpose of life and is not a means to anything else. The contemplative act has its own reason; it rests on its own foundation. Contemplation cannot be manipulated in order to gain something else. In this respect, it is not a stage. It has no further intentionality. It requires innocence, because the very will to achieve contemplation becomes an obstacle against it. The contemplative act is a purely spontaneous, free, unconditioned act, moved only by its own impulse; it is *svadhā*, as the *Rg-veda* would say.<sup>1</sup> The contemplative is the one who simply "sits," simply "is" and lives.

Socrates, eagerly learning a new tune on his flute the night before he was to die; Luther, who would have liked to plant an apple tree on the morning of the last day; St. Aloysius Gonzaga, who would have continued to play during recreation time even if he had known he was to die that very night; the delight of the Zen master in watching the struggle of an ant indifferent to the fact that he's hanging over an abyss, tied by a rope that is soon to be cut—all these are examples of the contemplative attitude, whether it is called mindfulness, awareness, enlightenment, concentration, or contemplation.

This attitude goes against the trend of modern civilization, be it "religious" or "secular," although I would not use these two terms as opposites, for both the secular and the religious can be sacred or profane.

It seems, in fact, that there are five great incentives in our society:

1. the heavens above for the believers;
2. history ahead for the progressives;
3. the work to be done for the pragmatists;
4. the conquest of great things for the intelligent; and
5. the ambition of success for everyone.

These five incentives are radically questioned by the contemplative mood. Contemplation stresses the *hic et nunc*, the *actus*, the hidden *centrum*, and the inner

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<sup>1</sup> RV X.129.2.

*pax*—not the elsewhere, the later, the result, the greatness of external actions, or the approval of the majority.

The first of these five threads of contemplation challenges traditional religiousness, which is all too often satisfied with postponing to another world the real values of life.

The second contests the cardinal dogma of a certain secularism that has simply transposed on to a temporal future the ideals of the religious mentality.

The third is a kind of praxis directly upsetting the pivotal values of the modern, mainly pan-economic society.

The fourth appears as an extraneous and destructive interference by the inner needs of the technological world.

The fifth directly questions the prevalent anthropological idea that human fulfillment entails the victory of one over the others, so that making victims becomes the necessary condition for one's sense of achievement.

### The Heavens Above (the *Here* versus the *Elsewhere*)

If you act for the sake of a reward in heaven you may get what you desire, but this is not a contemplative act (that is, a loving act), whose only care is that of acting with no desire to reach perfection or attain a reward. When the contemplatives eat, they eat; when they pray, they pray, as the masters remind us. They act *sunder warumbe*, "without a why," as Eckhart would say.<sup>2</sup> The contemplative cannot conceive of what is meant by an afterlife, as if the life now witnessed were not life, the Life, the thing itself. According to most traditions, the contemplative experiences reality, God, heaven, *brahman*, *mokṣa*, *nirvāṇa*, *satori*, realization, the truth, being or nothingness . . . , here below, in the very act that is being performed, in the very situation that is being experienced. Contemplative life is already a heavenly condition—an ultimate life, as the mystics say. And if this is not the case, if still something remains to desire, you have not yet reached contemplation.

"Master, three years have I followed you; what have I found?" "Have you perchance lost something?" was the reply of the Hindū *guru*.<sup>3</sup> "Philip, he who sees me has seen the Father," says the Christian Gospel.<sup>4</sup> *Nirvāṇa* is *samsāra* and *samsāra* is *nirvāṇa*, affirms *mahāyāna* Buddhism.<sup>5</sup> "And if I have to go to hell it does not matter; heaven is this, it is you, it is here," sing the Muslim mystics.<sup>6</sup>

A desire for anything, even if it be the desire not to desire, is already the sign that you have not the contemplative spirit, that you have not attained that "holy indifference" that Ignatian spirituality so emphasized, an indifference that transcends all differences to the point that the contemplative *is* seen to be "beyond good and evil,"

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Predigt 26* (*Deutsche Werke* II.26–27), *Predigt 41* (*Deutsche Werke* II.249), and *passim* as given in the critical edition, ed. Quint (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer).

<sup>3</sup> Ramana Maharshi.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 14:9.

<sup>5</sup> *Mādhyamika-kārikā* XXV.19.

<sup>6</sup> 'Rābi'a and also al-Bistāmi.

as the *Upaniṣad* says.<sup>7</sup> This last phrase should be understood correctly.<sup>8</sup> If you do something that you think is wrong, then of course you are not beyond good and evil. One may question whether it is possible to go beyond good and evil, but, granted the possibility, the notions of good and evil are no longer adequate to describe an act that has supposedly transcended both. "These two thoughts do not occur (to the realized): I have done evil, I have done good," clarifies the same *Upaniṣadic* text.<sup>9</sup> The new innocence is not something that can be claimed at will.<sup>10</sup>

The contemplatives do not need "heaven above," because to contemplatives, everything is sacred: they treat "sacred" things as profane. They eat the forbidden bread, burn holy images, put their feet on the *Shivalinga*, and do not keep the detailed precepts of the Sabbath. Why? Because they treat profane things as sacred. "On earth as it is in heaven," says an ancient prayer.<sup>11</sup> "If you see the Buddha, kill him!" says the Mahayana tradition.<sup>12</sup> "If you meet the Christ, eat him!" could be a Christian *mahā-vākya*.

Contemplation is not worried about tomorrow; it is not concerned about how to reach *nirvāṇa* or to conquer heaven. This is also the reason why the contemplative does not quarrel about doctrines. The mystic accepts the established doctrines but does not found his faith on them. Doctrines are crutches, or at best channels or glasses, but they do not substitute for the walking, the water, or the sight implied in these traditional metaphors. Dogma is hypothesis, not *theoria*. "Truth can only be apprehended by itself," as Nicholas of Cusa<sup>13</sup> said, echoing Meister Eckhart; this was repeated by Ramana Maharshi and so many others before and after—by each independently because in each case it is an immediate discovery. Any affirmation based on something other than itself cannot be absolutely true. The contemplative knows that:

*No me mueve, mi Dios, para quererte  
el cielo que me tienes prometido*

I am not moved, my God, to love you  
by the heavens you have promised me.<sup>14</sup>

This is as the Spanish contemplative of the *Siglo de Oro* used to say, striving to show the positive side of quietism and proclaiming anew what the *Bhagavad-gītā*

<sup>7</sup> TU II.9.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. BG II.50.

<sup>9</sup> TU II.9. Cf. also BU VI.3.22; MaitU VI.18.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Jn 6:44.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Mt 6:10.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Taisho 45.500.b (the saying is attributed to Nāgārjuna).

<sup>13</sup> *De Deo abscondito*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> The Spanish text is anonymous for fear of the Inquisition. Some have attributed it to St. Teresa. Cf. BG III.4; IV.20; XVIII.49; *Dīgha-Nikāya* III.275, etc.

and the Buddhist texts had said centuries before: you should be neither careless nor careful because you are neither "less" nor "full" but free and thus carefree. *Svarga kamo yajeta*—"sacrifice for the sake of going to heaven"<sup>15</sup>—is a great thing, says the *Mīmāṃsa*, but it is not in this way that you will attain *mokṣa* (liberation), adds the *Vedānta*.

Contemporary people may not believe in a God who rewards and punishes, and do not care much about the existence of a heaven above, but most of their actions are done with an attentive eye on the fluctuations of Mammon, who punishes and rewards and who is not above (in heaven) but behind (human actions). The contemplatives are impervious to such incentives. They have discovered in their heart that "*makarioi*, blessed, happy, are the poor in spirit."<sup>16</sup> The contemplative is not moved by money—not because he despises it, but because it is not indispensable. That is why a society that requires money to survive is anticontemplative.

### The History Ahead of Us (*Now versus Later*)

Secular society wants to build the "earthly city." But this takes time. If temporality is all that we have, the city of Man will always be the city of the future, because the present city is far from being what it should be. Modern life is a preparation for the future, for the time to come. Credit, growth, education, children, savings, insurance, business—all are geared for "later," oriented toward the possibilities of a future that will remain forever uncertain. We are always on the go and the quicker the better, in order to gain time. Without planning, strategy, preparation, and purpose for the future, our lives are unconceivable. Temporality haunts our age; the time factor is the aspect of nature we try to overcome. Acceleration is the great discovery of modern science. Both individually and collectively, the lives of a majority of our neighbors are all bent forward, running toward the goal, the prize, in unrelenting competition, heading toward the "Great Event." Soteriology has become eschatology, sacred as well as profane.

On the other hand, the contemplative arrests the course of worldly time. Temporality stops for the contemplative or, rather, it turns on itself, so that tempiternal reality emerges. Contemplation is not interested in the *later* but in the *now*. Even when the contemplative is actively engaged in something that concerns the future, he acts with such absorption in the present that the act that follows is truly unpredictable. Contemplative action is creative, a new beginning, not a conclusion. If you are a contemplative, you may find a Samaritan on the way and come late to the meeting, or just remain playing with some triviality that happens to catch your fancy. Ultimately, you have no way to go, no place to reach. All pilgrimage is renounced. Only the tempiternal present counts and is experienced as real. The meaning of your life does not rest only in its final achievement, just as the sense of a symphony is not

<sup>15</sup> A ritual brahminic sentence.

<sup>16</sup> Mt 5:3.



merely in the conclusion: each moment is decisive. Your life will not be unfulfilled even if you do not reach your golden age but meet with an accident along the road. Every day is a life, and each day is enough in itself. The contemplative does not hope for eternity hereafter but lives in temporality now.

Contemplation reveals the fullness of everything that is, for the very fact of being what it really is. "Man has to be happy because he is," says Ramon Llull at the beginning of his bulky *Book of Contemplation*.<sup>17</sup> Happiness seems to be the contemplative's lot because the true contemplative expects nothing of the morrow. Time has been redeemed, overcome, or denied. The Kingdom, *nirvāṇa*, is already here and now—though not in a Newtonian sense. If you are a realized person, realization has brought you nothing. The difference is that (before) you did not know it. You were already there, or rather, you were already *that*. The costly perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor, but the lover was justified because she performed "an act full of beauty" with pure spontaneity, as Jesus implied when he defended her.<sup>18</sup> "Rejoice with me," sings a blind singer of the Baul people: "I cannot see darkness." Nor can we see the light—only the illuminated world.

This doctrine is dangerous and risky indeed. Contemplatives are above or outside society, as so many texts affirm, but they can lose their innocence. Other people may even try to use their indifference and disinterest in order to further exploitation and injustice. In the end, however, their "perfect joy" seems to be untarnished by any event, as the Franciscan tradition describes.

Contemporary men and women are always in a hurry to get to the next thing, whereas for the contemplative there is no fundamental difference between a heaven above or a history ahead. They are both postponements: you shall be granted entry into heaven, or you shall progress into history. Whether we are dealing with individualistic capitalism or state capitalism, with the traditional belief in heaven or with the Marxist belief in history, the difference between a profit that lies above and one that lies in the future is a difference of degree and direction only. If Marxism in the West is considered a (Christian) apostasy, in the East it appears as a (Christian) heresy. If in the West, Christianity is considered an alienation, in the East it appears as a first step toward socialization. Marxism and Christianity are first cousins.

The contemplative attitude does not follow such a pattern. If you have to play the secular game, do it honestly, but without worshipping the rules. Each moment is in itself full and at best begets the next: "*Caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar*" (Wayfarer, there is no path, the path is made in the walking), sings Antonio

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<sup>17</sup> *Book of Contemplation* 1.2: "Much should Man rejoice because of this, that he exists." The first chapter, of course, tells of the joy of Man for the existence of God; and the third for the existence of others. "Philosophus semper est laetus" (The philosopher is always joyful), he added in his *Liber Proverbiorum* (ed. Magontina VI, int. V, 122). He begins his *Book of a Thousand Proverbs* with a proverb on joy: "Haja's u alegre, per ço car Deus es tot bo e complit."

<sup>18</sup> Mt 26:10.

Machado.<sup>19</sup> Each moment contains the whole universe. Continuity is not a solid thing, nor a substance: it is *anatmavada*. There needs to be no sense of frustration if you do not accumulate merits, power, knowledge, or money, because every moment is a unique gift and complete in itself. *Khano ve ma upaccaga*<sup>20</sup> (Let no moment escape you). This tempiternal now that the contemplative experiences is obviously not just the crossing of a hurried past and an accelerated future. It is rather a crossroad that has in itself all the past, because although it died, it has risen, and all the future, because although not yet dawned, it conserves all the brightness of a hidden sun that can appear in any corner of the horizon.

It is not by escaping time—assuming that were possible—that the contemplative discovers the tempiternal dimension. It is rather by integrating it completely in the vertical dimension that constantly intrudes on the horizontal temporal line. Tempiternity is not the absence but the fullness of time, and this fullness is certainly not just the future.<sup>21</sup>

### The Duty of Work (the *Act* versus the *Product*)

The modern addiction to work appears as a spreading epidemic for all humanity. You have to work because apparently your existence has no value in itself; therefore, you must justify your life by its usefulness. You have to be useful by contributing to the welfare of a society that has ceased to be a community. You cannot afford to be an ornament; you have to become a utility. It is not just that you have a role to perform; it is not your *svadharma*<sup>22</sup> that is expected of you; it is not that you fit into a more or less dynamic pattern, as in most traditional societies. You are expected to produce, to make something different from yourself, something that can be objectified, made available, and exchangeable through money. You have to earn what you consume, besides your reputation and privileges, or you will be looked down upon as a worthless parasite. The beggar is a criminal liable to prosecution. Nothing is free of charge, nothing is donated as a gift; even “gratuities” are taxable income! Everything has a price, and you must earn enough to pay that price. Work may be of many types, but all work is homogenized, since it is all convertible into money. The realm of quantity required by science has turned into the rule of money for human life. Money is what allows the quantification of all human values, thus making possible any kind of transaction.

You are real inasmuch as you work and produce. There is no other criterion for the authenticity of your work than your results. You will be judged by the results

<sup>19</sup> *Proverbios y cantares* V.

<sup>20</sup> *Dhammapāda*, 315.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. R. Panikkar, “El presente tempiterno,” in *Teología y mundo contemporáneo*, ed. A. Vargas-Machuca (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1975), 133–75.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. BG II.31.

of your works. You may relax and take it easy, but only in order to work better and produce more. You may be able to choose the type of work you feel at ease with, because if you work with pleasure you will produce more and tire less. Even cows are given music to listen to! "Work is a cult." Efficiency is a sacred name, and life is subordinated to production. Even food becomes a military weapon—euphemistically called a political lever.

To be sure, traditional societies are not free from a certain obligation to work, even from work for others. We should not idealize the past or other cultures. But there is something specific in the work-as-duty characteristic of modernity. A capital sin in Christian morality used to be sadness, disgust, *acedia*. Nowadays it is translated as laziness, idleness. *Otium*, leisure, has become a vice, and *negotium*, business, a virtue. In a hierarchical society, once you have reached adulthood, your status is recognized, which may give you a sense of fulfillment. In an egalitarian society the highest posts are supposedly open to everyone. If you do not reach them, after having had—in theory—the same opportunities, it means you have failed. You must work better and harder!

The modern technological world has become so complex and demanding that in order to "enjoy its blessings," one has to obey its laws. The first of these laws is to consider your work as the first of your obligations. Work becomes an end in itself, and this end is not the fulfillment of the human being but the satisfaction of work's requirements. The assumption that every human being is a bundle of needs whose satisfaction will automatically bring fulfillment and satisfaction is the underlying myth I have called elsewhere the "American Way of Life," now collapsing in the country of its origin but spreading all over the world as the necessary condition for the success of technology.

Be that as it may, the contemplative is at loggerheads with such a discourse. First of all, he has a totally different attitude toward work. Primacy is not given to the work but to working, that is, to the action in itself (the *finis operationis* of scholastic philosophy), so that every work may yield its own meaning. If an action is not meaningful in itself, it will simply not be done. Respect for each being and its constitution is characteristic of the contemplative attitude. A plant is cultivated because the act of cultivating is meaningful in itself, a collaboration between Man and the vital forces of nature, an enhancement of both nature and culture, an ennobling inherent in the act itself. It is neither the act of a slave nor that of a lord, but that of an artist.

The second intentionality (the *finis operantis* of the Scholastics), or the intention of the agent, will be a harmonious prolonging of the very nature of the act. We cultivate the plant not only because it enhances beauty and increases life but also because it gives nourishment. Eating belongs to the cosmic order that represents the dynamism, mutual influence, growth, and transformation of the whole universe. Eating is not a selfish act; it is a dynamic communion with the whole world.

In the third place, intentionality tends to merge with the very end of action (*finis operis*) so that personal intentions are practically reduced to nought. The contemplative renounces the very results of work, performing every kind of activity for the

sake of the act itself, and not for what may come of it (*naiṣkarmya karma*).<sup>23</sup> If the action is not meaningful in itself, it will not be done. If it is already full of meaning, it shall not be treated as a mere means to something else. The contemplative does not do anything for the sake of obtaining something else. There is a place here for art, because each and every one of the intermediate steps has a meaning in itself, just as a rough sketch or a sculpted torso may be as beautiful and complete in its own way as a finished composition. This does not exclude the consciousness of performing partial acts in view of a whole, but, as in a Japanese tea ceremony, each act is an organic part of the entire operation. The contemplative eye is the eye that captures the radiance of each moment, the transparency of the most simple, everyday message. There is still place for activity toward the future, because the final cause is present from the beginning, and the act itself is the totality of all its different aspects.

The contemporary obsession with work, even when it is not focused on productivity and is rather proudly called creativity, is not able to make each of us a true *Homo faber*, a maker, because what you end up making is neither your life, nor your own happiness, nor even that of a collective. You work—that is, you are chained to the *tripalium*, an instrument of torture and origin of the word “travail”—in order somehow to justify your existence in the eyes of others and, alas, for many people today, to justify it also in their own eyes and in the sight of their God.

The contemplative is not the ascetic who sets to work on himself, on others, and on worthwhile goals. The contemplative enjoys life because life is joy and *brahman ānanda*, and sees a whole garden poised in a single flower. He is able to see the beauty of the wild lilies even if the fields are unproductive. The contemplative has the spontaneous power to transform a situation by the sheer joy of having discerned the bright spot in the otherwise dark canvas of human transactions.

### **The Power of Great Things (*Inner Life versus Outer Appearance*)**

A fundamental praxis in contemplative life is concentration, the attempt to reach one's own center. This center is within; it has no dimensions and is equidistant from all activities. When established in the center, you acquire serenity, which in German is called *Gelassenheit*; in Spanish, *sosiego*; in Sanskrit, *śama*; in Latin, *aequanimitas*; in Greek, *sophrosyne*. None of these terms should be confused with self-satisfaction. This inner balance is such that it does not draw you to where the action is, tempt you with ever greater seductions, or entice you with the power of Great Things. A concentrated substance has more density but less volume.

The very way in which words like “big” and especially “great” denote quality and goodness betrays the modern temperament, seduced by economic empires, multinational corporations, and superpowers. When we speak of the “great religions” we mean the “important” ones. The so-called power of the majority is another example. Even though a tiny technocracy can manipulate the masses through the power of

<sup>23</sup> Cf. BG III.4.20; XVIII.49.

technology, the "majority"—in theory—confers power. What counts, what gives value, is the power of numbers. If, by chance, you are different from "the rest," you may easily feel threatened or at least insecure about yourself. In this situation the center is not within. You are displaced. You perceive the center in the outer power that you would like to conquer.

Linguistic imperialism is another example of this attitude. Dialects, when not despised outright, are certainly not taken seriously. At the least, you have to speak a "world language." This makes you important. Villagers are simply provincial. If your idioms do not follow the trends set by the mass media, they are either unintelligible or considered eccentric by the majority. Language has always been a creation of a living, speaking group. The poetry of most languages has had its humble birth in the colorful specificity of the spoken dialects. These dialects may either be Dante's language becoming common, the Sanskrit shaped by *pandits*, or a modern academic Western language subtly imposed by so-called scholarly standards. Nowadays those who are powerful enough broadcast their idiosyncratic language onto the air to propagate their particular way of seeing the world, of saying things, before the eyes and ears of millions of passive spectators and listeners. The storytellers and singers of the Indian villages are quickly disappearing. Language has become something that is passively heard or read, a commodity we receive rather than a living way by which we express ourselves creatively and recognize the meaning of the words of our dialogical partners. We have far more monologues than dialogues. No wonder we find our language deteriorating and the art of conversation becoming elitist, for our communication is the by-product of what we see on television or hear on the radio, or find written in the watered-down, simplistic prose we are subjected to in our newspapers. The *idiotés* (someone with a specific way of being) has become an idiot, and idiosyncrasy almost an insult.

The very symbol of civilization is the Great City, where the mass-media mentality is paramount.

The pressure is to climb ever higher the ladder of importance, power, and success; we have to be promoted in order to feel real, gain self-confidence, and inspire confidence in others. Mobility becomes the very sign of our status. Progress has become a quantitative concept. The maximum is the ideal.

The contemplative not only understands the theoretical need for the decongestion of modern society but puts it into practice. If I am not able to find the center of reality in my own self—or at least in that context *that* is concentric in relation to my own center—I will not be able to overcome the schizophrenic feeling of being someone displaced if I do not live in the capital city or work in the biggest university, industry, corporation, or firm, or earn the highest possible salary. I will be nervous or at least tense until I will have reached the top—not the center.

The contemplatives do not play this game: not because of selfishness or the kind of hedonism expressed in the Spanish proverb—"Ande yo caliente / y riase la gente" (I am nice and warm / let people sneer at me); nor because they do not care about efficacy or enjoy what is small more than other things, but because the real

meaning of life is elsewhere. Although many statesmen and secular thinkers like Aldous Huxley and Arnold Toynbee have written about the illusion that politics will change the world, this illusion will continue to tempt religious people into becoming mere politicians. There is a deeper dimension to life, however, a more profound arena where we can work for true change. Here is where we discover the often neglected monastic dimension of Man.<sup>24</sup>

The contemplative is happy, like a healthy child passionately playing with a toy. Seeing the child's joy, someone may try to snatch the toy away, but she will return to her play with another toy, which may in its turn be snatched away from her by the same people who mistakenly believe that joy comes from the toy itself.

We have already warned that contemplation is risky, because this holy indifference can be exploited by others who will eventually violate the limits of the tolerable. A religion fostering contemplation can often become the opium administered not only, for instance, by the British to the Chinese but also by missionaries, brahmins, and priests to the people. In this light, masters—both in the East and in the West—have always spoken of *viveka*, discernment, as an indispensable element in true contemplative life.

### **The Ambition of Success (*Contentment versus Triumph*)**

Ambition is a key word for the modern world, but it is also an ambivalent one. On the one hand, every human being, or so we are told, wants and needs to achieve something. An innate ambition spurs humans toward perfection in a sort of self-transcendence. We would like to unfold all our latent possibilities, actualize our potentialities. On the other hand, this urge to *be* is translated, especially in the West, as the need for success on a social level. Contemporary men and women are frantically concerned with gaining the acceptance of their fellow beings. In a so-called democratic society, our power seems, among other things, directly proportional to the reputation we hold. We have been told that we must fashion our own image and then skillfully project it outward to others so that our words and actions will carry weight. Modern man aspires to be at the center of decision making, to be involved in the concerns of society at all levels because society—rather than a *dharma*, the rule of law, a cosmic order, or God—reigns and decides in our lives. We feel the need to triumph. When we look for the dominant motive that drives people in our society, we find that it is the desire for success, for achievement. Success in a technological society has become an objectified value, easily measurable in terms of financial power or supposed economic freedom. Success in a competitive society is measured by the number of people (victims) you have left behind. It is not personal contentment but objectified achievement.

Many traditional religions have often had the same objectified model, so that only victors and heroes reach heaven; the others are annihilated, go to hell, or are

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. R. Panikkar, *Beata semplicità: La sfida di scoprirsi Monaco* (Assisi: Cittadella, 2007).

condemned to return endlessly to the earth. In a system of this kind, you can easily fall into the trap of despising earthly ambitions simply because you have projected the same type of desires on to a heavenly realm. Monasteries could easily be filled by people who, seeing they were not likely to achieve much in the affairs of this world, might seek to gain success by working and toiling for a heavenly reward. A certain anthropomorphic image of God is equally a transposition, although in a somewhat more refined way, of the same attitude: we might do anything to please a personal God, even neglect human recognition, provided we are sure that God is satisfied with us, sees us, and will reward us in due time.

This attitude should not be confused with the motivation of love for the beloved—human or divine—that leads you to do anything to please your loved one and that person alone. He or she or the divine person is the true aspiration and driving force in your life, in your every action.

The *bhakti* spirituality of all ages and places seems to be a human constant, something that will always attract a certain type of person. But even with the necessary corrections, and taking into account considerable variations, such an approach is different from that of the contemplative.

Contemplation, of course, cannot exist without love, whereas there can be love without contemplation. Furthermore, to the contemplative, love is not the ultimate motivation. Or, rather, it is the ultimate motive, but the motive is not yet the thing itself. In the final instance, the contemplative acts without motives. There is no further external or alien motive that could be separated from the action performed for its own sake. Jacopone da Todi has expressed this by saying, "*La rosa non ha perché*" (The rose has no why). It is because it is. It is simply there, even though, like the lilies of the field, it is only there for a short while. Or rather, no while is short; each while is and is unique. Contemplatives burn their own lives every day. Every day exhausts all the eons and universes. Each moment is a new creation. The authentic contemplative attitude should not, however, be confused with any of its pitfalls, such as narcissism, purely aesthetic pleasure, or self-complacency. "*La vertu non è perché, ca'l perché è for de tene*" (Virtue has no why, for the why is out of place), says Jacopone again.<sup>25</sup>

To contemplatives there is no such thing as an "above" or a "below"; they will never quarrel as to whether there is or is not a "God" in the sense understood by most of the traditional religions.

This is why contemplatives surprise us. You cannot force them into a mold. There is no predicting what they will do next or what their next move will be. The "fools of God" in Russia, India, and elsewhere, the Platonic madness and the enthusiasm of the shaman, could provide us with examples of this apparently "anarchical" phenomenon. Contemplatives are led by the Spirit, and the Spirit is Freedom and cannot be reduced to the *logos*. Yet contemplatives may also learn to act like everybody

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<sup>25</sup> *Laudi* L.X; cf. also A. Silesius, *The Cherubic Pilgrim*, l.289: "Die Rose ist ohn warum, sie bluhet, weil sie blühet" (The rose has no wherefore, it blossoms because it blossoms).

else, though with another kind of motivation. You will discover a note of mirth in their actions—often also a seemingly ironic smile. They do not confront you with another power, an anti-power, but they somehow undermine your power by simply not giving a thought to it.

Contemplative studies will, in the same way, challenge our idea of what it means to “study,” or rather, will recover its original meaning.<sup>26</sup> You cannot teach contemplation or even study it as a subject matter. *Studium* itself may become dedication to contemplation—that thirst for understanding what it is all about for no other motive than knowledge itself. To practice contemplation is to become contemplation. Study, then, itself becomes contemplation, an end in itself and not a means to master a certain discipline or to acquire some information on what so-called contemplatives have been talking about.

The concept of study implies something more when applied to contemplation. Contemplative *studium* suggests that the contemplative act is not yet completed and so not yet perfect. It indicates that the contemplative act itself is still in the making. It implies the effort or rather the tension of the soul, which, having in some way perceived the goal, is still not fully there and so is stretched, as it were, between our common condition and its (relative) fullness. *Studium* is the way. One single stroke of the brush in Japanese calligraphy may not be the whole sentence or convey the entire meaning. Yet in every single stroke there exists a world in itself, and the final cause or the finished sentence is already contained in each of those strokes. This means that the contemplative act is a holistic act and cannot be atomized at will. Ultimately, contemplative study is not a subject for inquiry or an object of investigation. Rather, it is more of an attitude, a particular way of seeing things, or, better still, an authentic appropriation, the real assimilation of the goal (*ad-propius*: “nearer”). Because everything is near, everything is considered sacred—an end in itself and not a means. It becomes your life, your love; *amor meus pondus meum*.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. the classical meaning of *svādhyāya* in Jainism and Hinduism. See, for example, *TU* I.9.1.

<sup>27</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions* XIII.9.



### 3

## THE INNOCENT LOOK

"Look at the birds of the sky and the lilies of the field," said the Master of Nazareth.

Philosophers and theologians of all sorts meditate on the cause or author of the lilies, but they overlook the lilies. Scientists and researchers of all kinds consider the components or functions of the lilies, but they forget the lilies. Politicians and economists of all classes look for the possible uses of the flowers. Lovers and worshippers cut them off to put them at the foot of the altar or on the bosom of the beloved. Artists and common people look at the beauty of the lilies, and strive to describe or shape their form or at least smell their fragrance.

We have all been "educated" in the use of intermediaries, in being users of everything, including lilies, and are only capable of or perhaps interested in analyzing or "reporting" like good journalists, so that later either we or others may "profit" from our experiments. If most of our contemporaries had witnessed, say, the events of Bethlehem or the Last Supper, we would have had plenty of photographs but no experience of those events. Modern believers still complain that the Evangelists, for instance, were too sober in describing the facts of Jesus's life. St. Joseph should have had a small camera and a hidden tape recorder; then we would really know.

The average modern citizen believes today that Man knows almost everything about the lilies: their sex life (of course), the chemistry of their color, the function of the pollen, their types and varieties, their market value, their symbolic uses, their metabolism with the earth, and many other such things.

### Contemplation

Yet, lilies *are*. Not that they are here, because they are also there. I do not say that they "were" (though perhaps they were less polluted in the times when that young rabbi told us to observe them) because lilies also *shall be*. To observe the lilies does not mean staring at them here or there, right now, before, or later. Knowing the lilies is more than placing them in space and time or analyzing their functions and parts. To know is more than to classify and to be able to predict behaviors.

To be precise, the Gospels tell us to look (*emblemsate*) at the birds, to consider (*katanoēsate*) the ravens and the lilies, and again to observe (*katamathéte*) the lilies (Mt 6:26f.; Lk 12:24f.). This is not the place for any literary exegesis. The three verbs convey the same meaning: *contemplate* the birds and the lilies.

To look at the birds in the sky is to see them flying. One is reminded of those verses of Acharya Atisa, the great Buddhist sage of the Mahayana tradition in the eleventh century, that say that a bird with unfolded wings cannot fly up into the sky, just as a Man who has not unfolded primordial wisdom cannot contribute to the well-being of the world (*Bodhipāṭha-pradīpa*, 35–36). To look at the birds is to fly with them. Contemplation is the undivided holistic activity that we later divide into theory and praxis.

To contemplate the lilies does not mean to consider how they grow and then draw the conclusion that we should not do anything. Neither does it mean that we should take them merely as an example. Looking at the lilies may free us from anxiety as a benefit, but this is not what looking is about. Looking is, first and foremost, a primary act. We need to be calm (*samata*, calm, repose, equanimity, as the Buddhists say) and not to feel anxiety over anything in order to observe properly.

To look at the lilies is truly to know them, and it is possible only if we are free not only from prejudices but also from any other burden on our mind. In traditional language, we can only truly know if our spirit is pure—that is, empty. Only emptiness—*śūnyatā*—makes things transparent and provides the “space”—*ākāśa*—necessary for freedom. “The heart of enlightenment is space,” says Shantideva, a Buddhist saint of the eighth century—according to the already mentioned Atisa.

To know the lilies is *also* to become a lily—though obviously not by transsubstantiation. Aristotle once said, “*Psyché pánta pōs*,” which the Scholastic philosophers translated as “*Anima quomodo omnia*.” This is not possible if we are fearful of losing our identity by becoming a mere plant, even though it may be a beautiful flower. We are more than flowers, as the very text reminds us. We are not speaking of a romantic “participation mystique” or prelogical amorphous identification. The more we are the other, the more we are ourselves.

## Love

“To love our neighbor as ourselves” is not to kindly treat our neighbor as another separate being, but to enlarge our heart (love) in such a way that the other may become part of ourselves. The true you is neither I nor non-I. Not he-she but Thou.

Clearly we do not want to cease to be ourselves and to be converted into lilies. But to be our true selves, we must transcend our ego and become lilies also. This is becoming what we (not yet) are. This overstepping of our boundaries has the philosophical designation of *transcendence* and the simple name of *love*.

Love is at the root of understanding, a discovery that most human traditions have made. To love is to be catapulted toward the beloved. Without knowledge we run the risk of alienation, which would not be true love. But also, knowledge without love is not true knowledge. It is only grasping, apprehending, appropriating—ultimately a robbery, a plunder. Ecosophy should “know” this.

To truly know is to *become* the thing known without ceasing to be what we are. Becoming or “coming to being” is not just a change; it is not a movement from

what we were to what we shall be. Such coming-to-being is the very growth of being—which allows being to be. It is the very rhythm of Reality. To consider the lilies growing is to let them grow within as well as without, in the field of the earth as much as in the field of our consciousness and in the divine realm. To know the lilies we need to *be with* the lilies. This is called *experience*. We also need to look at them. This is called *observation*. We do not need to tear them apart, to do violence to them. This is called *experimentation*.

Experience is allowing the lilies to grow in me; observation is allowing myself to be enriched by the lilies; experimentation is to exploit the growth of the lilies for whatever use we believe we are entitled to. The first has to follow the rhythms of nature; the second, our rhythms; the third needs to introduce acceleration. It has to break the rhythms. It has no time to wait. It has an inbuilt sense of urgency. Then life is felt as an *urgent* task (to do something), not necessarily as an *important* act (of being).

### Reality

The vision of Reality is the vision that Reality has in ourselves; this is the way things become real. This is the human act: to be a sharer in the creative Word, as the *Veda* reminds us (*RV* I.164.37). The vision of Reality is not my own new or old outlook on things, but the vision that Reality itself reveals in me. The purer and emptier I am, the clearer the vision, the more undistorted the image. We are mirrors of the whole. This is the specific dignity of Man, said the Christian Scholastics: to be able to speculate, that is, to be a *speculum* of the real.

But the evangelical text does not forget to mention the context: the birds of the sky, the flowers of the field. The sky and the field form the context of our contemplative vision. There is no bird nor lily *an sich*—as such—neither *in me*, much less *for itself*, nor even *quoad nos*. Sky and field are the mediators of our vision. They are not intermediaries. Bird and sky, lily and field belong together. There is neither bird without sky nor lily without field, and vice versa: there is no sky or field without something in it. A holistic vision distinguishes but does not separate. Yet we must not understate the self-emanation of Reality, the *svayamprakāśa* of Indian traditions. The vision then is neither an objective picture nor a subjective insight. The vision is invisible, like light which brings clarity, but is darkness in isolation. "Blessed are those who have reached infinite ignorance," said Evagrius Ponticus, another sage of the Western tradition.

Contemplation is not blind, but neither is it pure vision, *theoria*. It is also *praxis*. It is the building of that temple from which Reality comes forth. We are spectators, actors, and authors of Reality not when we are alone but when we move in solidarity, that is, in integration. A way toward such integration and one of its results (the *upāya*, *anupāya* of Kashmiri shaivism) is to look at the birds and observe the lilies.



# 4

## ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION AS CATEGORIES OF RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING

*Avijātam vijānātam  
vijātam avijānātam*

Not understood by those who understand;  
it is understood by those who do not understand.

—KenU II.3

Ἀπολῶ τὴν σοφίαν τῶν σοφῶν  
καὶ τὴν σύνεσιν τῶν συνετῶν ἄθετήσω

I shall destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and bring to nothing the understanding of those who know.

—1 Cor 1:19<sup>1</sup>

Action and contemplation have been, since time immemorial and under one name or another, invariant religious categories.<sup>2</sup> Lest we become lost in the jungle of meanings and interpretations of the various religious traditions of the world, it may suffice for our purpose to use these words in designating two fundamental human attitudes: the centrifugal and the centripetal. The first is predominantly material, exterior, "realistic," historical, and temporal; the second is predominantly spiritual, internal, "idealistic," archetypal, and atemporal. *Poiesis* and *theoria* or *karma* and

<sup>1</sup> "Perdam sapientiam sapientium, et prudentiam prudentium reprobabo"; cf. Is 29:14; Ps 33:10. Practically all traditional Scriptures as well as oral traditions of humanity are full of such statements, which have so often been interpreted hyperbolically by scribes and pandits.

<sup>2</sup> This chapter is a revised version of articles that appeared in *Main Currents of Modern Thought* 30, no. 2 (November–December 1973), and in *Contemplation and Action in World Religions: Selected Papers from the Rothko Chapel Colloquium "Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action,"* ed. Yusuf Ibish and Ileana Marculescu (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1978).

*jñāna* could perhaps be equivalent words, whereas *praxis* and *bhakti* would have a role of mediating between them. The active mood checks, interferes, experiments, reasons; it is mostly pragmatic, testing an idea by its fruits. The contemplative mood observes, sees, experiences, intuitis; it is mostly theoretical, accepting an idea by its own radiance and power. The active is existential; truth is conquered (in making it). The contemplative is essential; truth is discovered (in the *simplex intuitus*).

Our purpose here will be threefold:

1. To uncover the paradoxical fact, that although contemplation, by and large, has been considered within the respective traditions to be a superior form of religious life, it has hardly ever played its incumbent role in the interreligious dialogue.
2. To demonstrate the valid and indispensable use of the contemplative approach in the religious encounter, by means of two examples from the Hindū and Christian traditions.
3. To suggest that both approaches are necessary but insufficient if taken in isolation; the approaches are complementary if rightly understood, leading to an interreligious fecundity that may be one of the major hopes for humanity today.

### The Primacy of Action

*Yathākārī yathākārī tathā bhavati*

As one acts and behaves, so does one become.

—BUIV.5

### *The Active Approach and Recent History*

People today have come much closer to each other, not only externally but also regarding a deeper understanding of the different cultures and religions of the world. This drawing together results from modern events such as the spread of the "scientific" mentality along with the rise of technology (which makes mass communication possible) and the end of a certain colonial period in history—that is to say, as a result of historical and cultural actions generally. Every person lives in and from a human environment, which we may call tradition, culture, or religion.

Gone, by and large, are those attitudes of radical arrogance and pride that used to make almost impossible any religious dialogue and cultural understanding. Ill will and even antipathies are also on the wane in the world of intercultural and interreligious relations. Sincere respect and a genuine thirst for true tolerance, on the other hand, are growing. All this has been brought about by the historical fact of the unavoidable contact between the diverse peoples of the world, who

can no longer afford to live in isolation. The present-day geographical and, to a great extent, historical unity of humankind is a positive factor in bridging the gulf between cultures and religious traditions. We are almost forced to reckon, in some way or another, with the problems of our neighbors: men and women, black and white, rich and poor; Hindūs, Buddhists, Christians, Marxists, and associations of ancient and modern types are interacting and, in point of fact, living together within the same national, economic, linguistic, and even cultural framework. The problem of understanding the other has become a burning issue in contemporary societies, East and West.

This opening up on a global scale has also brought its attendant sufferings, conflicts, and confusions. But one of the most positive features of our tortured and fecund present is the tangible need for a truly human culture that would also make room for an almost indefinite number of subcultures with their respective variations. There is a hunger, not for mere ideologies, but for the emergence of the *humanum*. We feel a ubiquitous desire for tolerance, mutual respect, sympathy, and freedom. We can no longer easily justify ex-communications, holy wars, wholesale condemnations, and blatantly elitist positions. To be sure, we differ in understanding what respect or freedom may mean, where they are to be found, and even more, on the proper means for achieving these values; nevertheless, the thirst for a mutual respect is emerging.

Yet most of these results are the fruit of the almost compulsory situation in which Man finds himself due to a certain historical dynamism, whatever theory we may cherish in order to explain the fact that the world seeks to become one. Scholars, thinkers, writers, men of letters, as well as men of religion, in the wake of politicians and businessmen, simply follow the times. The scholars are busy explaining the astonishing changes taking place (sociology has become the queen of the sciences) and hardly have time for anything else, let alone to steer the course of events and much less to bring a contemplative and creative view to bear upon them. Most of the prophets in all fields are people of action.

In a word, action and the active mood dominate the modern scene. Certainly, within particular groups or "new religions," and even in the world at large, many are prepared to accept the contemplative attitude or intuition as the superior one. But contemplation as such, generally reserved for the elect few, will hardly make a noticeable impression on the decision-making agencies that seem to steer the events of the world on many different levels. One is not likely to find many theoreticians, "saints," monks, or contemplatives in these agencies; they prefer calm and solitude, and disdain or even despise the strains and stresses of the active person. In the encounter of cultures and religions, the events themselves and the men who direct them play the primary role. But although mankind has come a long way and may be marching in the right direction, there is still an enormous and fundamental task to perform. It may be reserved for a more contemplative approach.

### *Limitations of the Active Approach*

In spite of the hope that human relations are improving, we cannot overlook the fact that we are far from a lasting and real understanding of each other. No amount of goodwill and sympathy, important as these ingredients are, will suffice. An underlying and unavoidable theoretical factor is still to be considered. A change of mind has to follow an incipient change of heart.

For example, Christians feel outraged when Hitler and Stalin are represented as baptized Christians; Hindūs are uneasy when reminded that Gandhi was killed by an orthodox Hindū; Indians become weary when faced with the fact that Hindūs and Muslims are at each other's throats the moment they are free to do so. The conflicts always existing between different peoples are far from being explained merely by saying that some want to dominate others. Are we prepared to accept the statement that over 100 million American citizens are all criminals because their country supported the Vietnam War? Are all white South Africans inhuman because they supported apartheid? Are all the Jews and Arabs, Irish and Russians, Chinese and Spaniards responsible for the respective situations they tolerate? Which human group, whether religious, cultural or historical, has only clean pages on its records? Not all is a question of personal animosity or individual greed.

A double standard seems to exist for judging oneself and the other. First, we judge the situation of our group (of whatever kind) from *within*—from an attitude of participation and concern, having an insight (a contemplative vision) into the inspiring sources of the particular community to which we belong. But we judge others from *without*, from their mixed fruits and without discrimination. We deduce what they are from what they do (according, of course, to our own criteria of judgment), attributing their actions to their particular group, culture, or religion. In judging our own group or tradition, we consider its positive values as the decisive criterion for interpretation; we judge what we are not from what we do but from what we are supposed to be. Are those who speak of the dignity of Christianity and the indignity of Christians ready to accept the dignity of Marxism and the indignity of Marxists? When Christians persecute, they are bad Christians, but when Marxists persecute, they are characterized (by Christians) as behaving in ways consistent with their beliefs. When a Christian is tolerant or broadminded, this is thought to be (by the Hindū) because of some Indian or Asian influence. And if a Christian has a burning concern for social justice, a Marxist feels that this must be due to Marxist influence. Can we compare the *Dhammapāda* with the Crusades or the Sermon on the Mount with Turkish conquests?

But the misunderstanding goes even deeper—to the very doctrines. Can a Muslim be convinced that the Christian Trinity is not tritheism? Can a Christian agree that Hindū *advaita* is not monism? Can a humanist accept the fact that Islam is more than a theocracy, or a Buddhist acknowledge that the Jewish idea of the elect is more than religious casteism? Is the Hindū ready to recognize that his idea of tolerance may be a very intolerant one?



These random examples illustrate the enormous task ahead. The problem transcends the realm of goodwill, desire to understand, mutual respect, and sympathy. Important and necessary as these factors are, they are not sufficient.

Commitment to truth as one sees it, irrespective of the consequences; loyalty to one's community; fidelity to one's own destiny, *karman*, duty, *svadharma*, historical mission; fear of anarchic eclecticism and of barren syncretisms; mistrust of generalizations; abhorrence of abstract and lifeless statements; avoidance of the deleterious effects of indiscriminate permissiveness, and so on—all of these things represent the other side of the issue, which in no way should be minimized. Not all problems are solved, indeed.

### *Features of the Active Character*

It would, however, be a distortion of the true perspective if we were only to underline the deficiencies of the active approach, for without its thrust, the world would still be living in compartmentalized and narcissistically self-satisfied little boxes, each thinking itself to be the whole universe and in possession of the whole truth. Were it not for the pressures of history and Man's active spirit, *brahmins*, *pandits*, scribes, priests, and professors of all kinds would still be convinced that they held the keys to every human problem and the property rights over any lasting and transcendent value. Only the incursions of one group into another have brought about eclectic and syncretistic attitudes, which were the starting points for more permanent symbioses and syntheses among different cultural worlds and religions. Were it not for the active spirit in Man, we would still be in our tribal state. Indeed, the tribe is a microcosm just as the human person is the image and mirror of the entire universe, but the one thing should not obliterate the other; nor should the internal dimension of Man cause us to forget his external constitution.

In the encounter of religions, the active approach seeks completion not so much by going deeper into oneself (with the consequent danger of finding only what one had previously projected) but by looking for fulfillment outside, or rather beyond, ourselves. We look to our neighbors before we look into our own hearts.

This attitude is based on the awareness of our own radical insufficiency; in point of fact, the active person is more inclined toward dialogue and learning from others than the contemplative spirit, which instinctively mistrusts such methods and looks for truth inwardly. This statement implies that the active mood is often inclined toward a humble recognition that the other may also have something important to contribute: I do not presume to have access to the universal range of human experience.

Precisely this thought prompts the active spirit to its excursions and spurs its curiosity into unknown realms. The active spirit certainly wants to dominate, but to do so it has to both understand and compromise. The history of Man, and especially the history of religions, offers ample testimony to this fact, exonerating us from pursuing the argument further.

### The Primacy of Contemplation

*Tam yathā yathopaste tadeva bhavati*  
One becomes what one meditates upon.

—SB X.5.2.20<sup>3</sup>

Τί δώσει ἄνθρωπος ἀντάλλαγμα τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτοῦ  
*What shall a man give in exchange for his own soul?*

—Mt 16:26<sup>4</sup>

### The Contemplative Approach

Assuming I succeed in understanding the other as other, this is insufficient, for the other does not understand himself as "other" but as "self." Therefore, I shall not really understand the other until I am able to perform on the intellectual-spiritual plane a feat similar to the moral injunction: Love your neighbor as your self (not *as* your neighbor but as your *self*). Is this possible? Traditional Christian morality used to say that this is only possible under the influence of divine Grace, for Man's natural disposition is incapable of such a transcendence. We may add, similarly, that on the intellectual plane this is possible only if we transcend the field of reason and, without denying it, reach the realm of true contemplation.

In order to understand others as they understand themselves, I have to become the other—that is, share in their experience, participate in their particular world, be converted to their way of life. How can a Christian understand a Hindū if he does not become a Hindū? A Christian may perhaps understand a kind of objectified Hindūism, but this does not tally with what the Hindū accepts and believes as his Hindūism. Living Hindūism is constitutively linked with the Hindū understanding of it, which includes the Hindū's self-understanding.

Conversely, how can a Hindū enter into the world of Christian belief if he does not somehow hold as true that same belief? Can I possibly understand you if I think that what you hold to be true is wrong? I may perhaps understand you *better* than yourself, but certainly not *as* yourself, if I do not share your self-understanding. To put it more philosophically, the belief of the believer belongs essentially to the religious phenomenon; the *noēma* of religion is not an objectified *creditum* or a hypothetical *credendum* but entails an unbreakable link with the *credens*. The belief

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also, "He who knows (sees) the supreme *Brahman* becomes *Brahman*," in *MundU* 3.2.9. Interestingly enough, it was this passage that Anquetil Duperron, the first translator of the *Upaniṣads* into Latin in 1801, put as the motto of the whole work: "Quisquis Deum intelligit, Deus fit."

<sup>4</sup> "Quam dabit homo commutationem pro anima sua?"

of the believer remains opaque for the observer until in one way or another it also becomes the *creed* of the observer.<sup>5</sup>

Within the categories of action, this enterprise is impossible. I cannot be in your place, just as my body cannot occupy the place your body occupies. If I am an active member of a particular religious group and that community embodies for me the concrete way toward my own ultimate fulfillment, I cannot belong to a parallel group. We may meet, like parallel lines, in the infinite; we may share in the same mystical body, but we should not blur the distinctions and commitments of concrete human groups and sociological bodies. You can be a member of two different clubs, but you cannot belong to two different churches—or so it would seem from an active point of view.

Now, contemplation means precisely the overcoming of the spatiotemporal categories as the only possible way of being consciously in the world and participating in the ongoing process of existence. Contemplation does not seek to understand rationally, nor is it an act of the imagination or a product of fantasy; it is actual participation in the reality one contemplates, real sharing in the things one “sees,” dynamic identification with the truth one realizes. Contemplation is not merely an act of mind but “touch”—real existential contact, to use a metaphor not only precious to Plotinus in the Western tradition but also to the early Tamil *bhakti* poet-saints of southern India. Contemplation, to further trace this line of thought, implies an “eating” of the object and also a “being eaten”; it reveals the absolute mutual transparency of subject and object. Seen another way, contemplation is the actual building of the temple of reality, wherein the onlooker is equally part and parcel of the whole construction.

This may be the reason why “concentration”—that is, the ontic crystallization of what is, the condensation of reality in the self above and beyond the mere psychological state—is in all traditions one of the most important features of the contemplative spirit. It is a vision of totality through the discovery of the center within; as above, so below, as the ancient hermetic formula put it. Nothing, then, is more obvious than that contemplation does not exclusively depend on the will of Man or the nature of things. It requires a higher harmony as an integrating force. Contemplation is an ontological phenomenon.<sup>6</sup>

True contemplation is thus an experience, not an experiment. We may deny the truth content of such an act, refuse to accept it, or even refer to it as pathological

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. R. Panikkar, “Verstehen als Uberzeugtsein,” in *Neue Anthropologie*, vol. 4, ed. H. G. Gadamer and P. Vogler (Stuttgart, 1974).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the studies by R. Panikkar, *Kultmysterium in Hinduismus und Christentum* (Munich, 1964), and a French revised translation, *Le mystère du culte dans l’Hindouisme et le christianisme* (Paris: Cerf, 1970); “Aktion und Kontemplation im indischen kultmysterium,” in *Una sancta* 2 (1966): 145–50; and “The Supreme Experience: The Ways of East and West,” in the last chapter of this volume.

(a product of shamanic "madness" or the magical hallucinations of a bygone age), but if we speak of contemplation at all, we have to take this claim seriously and deal with it accordingly. If there is any possible bridge between the different religious traditions (through which we understand ultimate forms or styles of life), only the contemplative can be in two or more traditions and thus perform a mediating and integrating role.<sup>7</sup> The fact that not all people have access to such an experience does not deny the possibility or even the plausibility of such an experience, since there is hardly anyone who has not been called upon to transcend his own limitations by an experience of conversion into "something"—or rather "somebody"—else that would maintain alive his constitutive human openness.<sup>8</sup>

Assimilation, to return to the metaphor of food, is essential to life. Contemplation is not, properly speaking, an approach; neither can it be used as a tool for anything else or manipulated in favor of any cause, however good. Contemplation is an end in itself—that superior life of the spirit that certainly does not ignore or despise the life of matter, of the senses, and of reason (for it is based on them) but which transcends them. It is irreducible to anything else, like any primary reality.

This thesis may be expounded by means of two religious traditions that form the background of these reflections: Hindūism and Christianity.

### *The Nature of Karman*

No word is more central, more universal, and more expressive of Indic religious traditions than *karman*; all forms of Hindūism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and also many forms of Parsi and animistic religions, in one way or another, recognize its law and its power.

A certain idea of *karman* links it with reincarnation, thus apparently denying the unrepeatable dignity of the individual and the uniqueness of Man's personal life on earth. As such, *karman* seems radically opposed to any Christian interpretation of Man and reality. Scores of popular writings have propagated this notion, now widespread in the East as well as the West. Does this issue not seem today to be, more than the "personal" character of God, the main stumbling block in the way of a real Hindū-Christian dialogue?

One of the reasons for this impasse is the predominantly active approach that is taken to the question. Given the perspective of the active mood, it would seem that one cannot owe allegiance both to the "immortality of the soul" and to the

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. R. Panikkar, "Fe y creencia. Sobre la experiencia multirreligiosa. Un fragmento autobiográfico objetivado," in *Homenaje a Xavier Zubiri*, vol. 2 (Madrid, 1970), 435–59, and its English translation, "Faith and Belief. A Multireligious Experience," in Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 1–23.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. R. Panikkar, "Faith as a Constitutive Human Dimension," in *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 188–229.

"reincarnation of the individual."<sup>9</sup> A contemplative approach, on the other hand, may yield unexpected possibilities for an intrareligious understanding, and even for a mutual fecundation.<sup>10</sup>

To begin with, the contemplative approach has no difficulty in disentangling *karman* from its different expressions; it does not identify that mysterious force or reality with any one particular doctrine. If one has had insight into what *karman* stands for and what its law expresses, one is not satisfied with any given explanation, being aware that concepts are meaningful only within the particular context that has given them birth. This being so, in our discussion about *karman* we may think our interlocutor's explanation is wrong or his integration of the concept into a coherent worldview is weak, but the discussion is only possible at all because, excluding merely dialectical consistencies or inconsistencies, both sides claim access to an insight into the reality of *karman*. This insight legitimizes the discussion and the strength of our convictions. We know what we are talking about because our talk is about something that has been disclosed to us prior to our talking about it. This attitude does not imply a mysterious "thing in itself" independent of our access to it, but neither does it imply that a mere subjective opinion is all there is. It implies that my conception of a thing belongs to reality—and even to the thing itself. But because the same is true for you, it also implies that neither my vision nor yours is the total reality.

Thus, a contemplative insight into the nature of *karman* immediately separates it from the idea of reincarnation, which may be one way of exemplifying *karman* but is by no means the same thing. Just as the Christian idea of the beatific vision is not necessarily connected with a material idea of heaven as a beautiful garden or hall on some celestial planet where God, bearded and enthroned on high, entertains his loyal servants, the Hindū idea of *karman* need not be linked up with an imaginary lingering of the past personality in the new bearer of the past *karman*. If *karman* excludes anything, it is the attitude that "my" life is somehow "private property"; to consider the "next" life as still "my own" amounts to the very negation of *karman*.

The central idea of *karman* relates to the cosmic solidarity of the whole creation, to the unrepeatable and unique value of each act, which never falls in the void or remains barren and without effect. It relates to the ultimate community of all beings, and it expresses also the idea of finiteness and contingency, for no being can escape the law of *karman*—that is, interrelatedness and responsibility for the whole universe.

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<sup>9</sup> It may be noted that the Christian outlook, which believes in the resurrection, appears to lay more stress on a postmortal life than on the immortal soul.

<sup>10</sup> On this point I may indicate other writings of mine, including "Algunos aspectos de la espiritualidad Hindū," in *Historia de la espiritualidad*, ed. L. Sala Balust and B. Jiménez Duque (Barcelona: Juan Flors, 1969), 433–542, and in *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), chapter XIV.

The contemplative mood is not satisfied with mere exegesis or with simple interpretation of texts. It certainly has a high regard for what others have thought, and especially seen, but does not denigrate itself to the role of a mere scribe or simple translator. The contemplative approach may eventually prove that all refer to the same reality, but will, nevertheless, be very conscious of the fact that reality itself has something to do with the vision one has of it. The contemplative insight is more than just a discovery; it is also a creation.

In contemporary terms, we might say that *karman* stands for the vision of the unity as well as the contingency of all empirical (or created) reality.

*Karman* is the link that connects us to every particle of reality and restores our sense of unity with the whole universe, for all beings are, without exception, governed (and nurtured) by the same cosmic law. This law is not a mere causal chain, for there are forms of dependence that belong to *karman* and are not necessarily causal, unless we expand the concept of cause to any process of interdependence. Essential in this view is the universality of such a law. All that is, precisely because it is, has a relatedness to everything else. The "chain" of being is not truly a chain, for it also liberates; the communion of all existence is not exactly communion, for there is also strife; the unity of the universe is not precisely unity, for it is also disunity, as the first of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths tells us. All are *karman*. To discover how *karman* acts is the acme of wisdom; it is realization.

*Karman* is also the expression of the contingency of all beings. It expresses their interrelatedness and thus their unity precisely because no individual being—nor even the entire universe—is complete, full, perfect, achieved. The world is unfinished and, in this sense, infinite. This infinitude accounts for freedom and the unforeseeable movement of all that is. Existence is open, ongoing, a spontaneous unfolding of possibility. Thus *karman* stands, paradoxically, both for the unity and the freedom of the contingent creature. This freedom is ultimate, for nothing is beyond, behind, or more fundamental than *karman*, which is the very coefficient of creatureliness. *Karman* is not a physical law, which has to follow an intellectual or mathematical pattern (thus making the universe a logical or mathematical prison); it is the ultimate law of the universe, governed by the very behavior of the universe itself. *Karman* vouches for and makes possible a real freedom that allows us to jump outside the realm of Being (of the universe) and reach the other shore—which, strictly speaking, is neither other nor a shore. Here the freedom is so absolute that it is a liberation from being itself (*nirvāṇa*, the Buddhists would say), for when *karman* is "burned," being is volatilized in the jump outside existence; only nothing reaches Nothingness. *Karman* is coextensive with existence.<sup>11</sup>

Everything that is submits to *karman*, because the karmic structure of the universe is the ultimate pattern. The "lord of *karman*," inasmuch as it is the lord of *karman*, is also within the embrace of *karman*. If it were outside *karman* it would no longer

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Richard of St. Victor in his *De Trinitate* IV.12: "Qui est enim existere, nisi ex aliquo sistere, hoc est, substantialiter ex aliquo esse?"

be its lord, for there must be a link between the lord and his world. This link, by definition, cannot but be *karman*. What else could it be? If it were something else, this else would then be the real *karman*.

Significantly, in speaking about *karman* the otherwise sober and concise *Upaniṣads* seem to open up not only to esoteric meanings but also to a more cordial and holistic approach to the mystery of life and death.<sup>12</sup>

This is in point of fact the subject of the public dialogue wherein Jaratkarava Artabhaga puts five questions to the famous sage Yājñavalkya:

1. What are the different organs of reality, and how is reality modified by them?
2. What is the death of death, if all is mortal?
3. What is the destiny of *prāṇa*, the vital breath, when a man dies?
4. What is the only thing that does not abandon a man when he dies?
5. What becomes of the person, or what is the mystery of life?

At this point, when speaking about the cosmic law connecting all the elements of the universe, the two went away hand in hand and in secret began to discuss and praise *karman*. The whole context helps us to realize that what is involved is not a philosophical subtlety but a fundamental query about the nature of the entire universe. The nature of *karman* is not open to mere dialectics; it is revealed in the ultimate dialogue with the Master, in personal meditation, in the contemplation of the mystery of temporal existence. Many doctrinal problems remain to be articulated, but the primacy belongs to a certain intuition of this ultimate mystery.

The Western contemplative perhaps does not speak the same language as the Indian of the East; he may not have access to the same symbols, but once he gets wind of the mystery spoken through the language he will be in tune with it. *Le mystère est commun*, says the poet St. John Perse. It is up to the contemplative, then, in collaboration with the philosopher, theologian, or poet, to find a language that further reveals that aspect of the mystery of life and reality.

Seen from this perspective, the nature of *karman* may even help to explain as fundamental a Christian insight as the connection of Adam and Adam's sin, as well as the relation of Christ, his death and resurrection, with the whole of humanity.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Identity of Jesus*

A major stumbling block, on the other hand, is the claim that Christians lay upon Jesus as the unique savior, the only name, the single way.

<sup>12</sup> BU III.2.1.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 15:22: "As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive."

Much ink has been spilled in the attempt either to support or to explain away such claims.<sup>14</sup> Here again, a contemplative mood might allow us to overcome the dilemma of either diluting the Christian message, and thereby emasculating the self-identity of one-fifth of the world's population, or making it a tool of domination over all the other religious traditions. With contemplative vision, we may begin to trace the emergence of a middle way.

If we raise the question (as Jesus did) of who this Jesus is about whom such claims are made, we discover that the active approach—based mainly on spatio-temporal and, thus, logical categories—tries to answer the question by means of a geographical and historical *identification* of Jesus: He was that young Jew, born of Mary, who lived in Palestine twenty centuries ago, died under Pontius Pilate, and still has historical and sociological significance. How to attribute to that man all that Christian belief affirms of Jesus has been one of the crucial problems of Christian theology: How is he one of the Trinity; how was he before Abraham; how was he the Messiah, the Redeemer of the whole world, the *Alpha* and *Omega*, and thus the only Savior, Way, and Name?

The contemplative approach does not minimize these problems but highlights another starting point: not the *identification* of *what* Jesus did or is, but the *identity* of *who* he is. Now, the *who* of Jesus may or may not be separable from his *what*, but it is certainly not identifiable with it. The *who* of Jesus is only disclosed in the personal encounter of faith, in the interpersonal relationship of finding a you answering to the call (prayer) of the *I*; it will be found when the *metanoia*, the change of perspective and roles, takes place so that Jesus becomes the *I* and the seeker the *thou*, so that the Master's "I am" becomes something more than a metaphysical or psychological statement. Then the Christian will utter, "I live no more but Christ lives in me."<sup>15</sup> He will have become transparent, entirely transformed, and will know that neither flesh nor will has conferred upon him the glory of being God's offspring.<sup>16</sup>

The *who* whom the Christian discovers may have been revealed to him in and through the *what* the tradition has handed down to him, but he will not confuse the two. For example, in the central Christian mystery, the Eucharist, the Christian will recognize Christ's *real presence*, yet he will not believe he is eating the proteins or drinking the blood of Jesus of Nazareth, for he knows that communion is with the real *who*, not with the *what*. Furthermore, in this light, we do not say that *what* the Buddhist believes in is *what* the Christian worships, but we can admit that the *who* behind the Buddhist's compassion or the Muslim's surrender is none other than the *who* of Christian *agape*.

If we apply the contemplative mood to the first question posed about Jesus, which concerns the basic Trinitarian and the non-Trinitarian understanding of the

<sup>14</sup> Cf. R. Panikkar, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), where these ideas are developed and given the necessary support of tradition and philosophy.

<sup>15</sup> Gal 2:20. Cf. also Col 3:3ff.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Jn 1:13–14.



Christian and the Muslim, we may begin by emphasizing the traditional *perichoresis* or *circumincessio* that puts in theological terms the surprising affirmation of Jesus: "Philip, whoever sees me sees the Father."<sup>17</sup> Our main point refers to the disclosure of the *who* in an actual personal relationship, not to the crystallized concept or even the intelligibility of the personal name. The personal relationship cannot be objectified without ceasing to be that personal relation. The *who* of the Muslim, assuming he is directing his prayer to Allah, is not the *what* of his theology, but the living reality with which he believes himself to be connected in a special way, and with which he enters into a very specific relationship. It is the ultimate "I" of his Thou-consciousness, unveiled to him in and through the Qur'an. We have no criterion whatsoever outside his personal world to affirm or deny its identity with the *who* of the Christian. Moreover, the question has no meaning and is a contradiction in terms. We say *who*, but we mean *what*. Here language fails us; at this point we need the contemplative leap that allows us to experience whether the living *I* with which a *you* is entering into relation is the same as the living *I* of the believer of another tradition or not.

In dialogue with the Hindū or Buddhist, the question of the *who* also needs an immediate qualification. Obviously, the *what* of Jesus is not the *what* of Krishna, in spite of the many resemblances we may find in favor of a merely psychological or archetypal theory regarding the origins of religious cults. But neither do we need to accept an anthropomorphic view. A personal relationship is any free and conscious mutual relationship that wholly or partially constitutes the existence of the persons who emerge through this act. We have used the personal pronouns—which happen to be the most universal linguistic symbols—but we do not necessarily assume a particular conception of a person. The *I-Thou* relationship should not be seen from the point of view of two separate beings exchanging the profusion of their lives. We could easily consider the personal relationship in a more radical way, so that nothing of the *I* would be there if the *you* were not also there, and vice versa.<sup>18</sup>

In order to illustrate the possibilities of the contemplative approach in the encounter of religions, just as we have quoted Yājñavalkya on *karman*, let us quote the Evangelist's testimony about Jesus: "He is not here, for he is risen," said the angel,<sup>19</sup> explaining with real insight what the Resurrection is all about to the courageous women who are bewildered at the sight of the empty tomb. Avoiding the theology of the Resurrection, a contemplative insight into one of its dimensions might be, "It is good and necessary that I go, that I disappear, otherwise the Spirit will not come";<sup>20</sup> otherwise you will make of me an idol, you will limit me to one idea or

<sup>17</sup> Jn 14:9.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. R. Panikkar, *Il silenzio del Buddha* (Milan: Mondadori, 2006), expanded edition of *The Silence of God: The Answer of the Buddha* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> "Non est hic, surrexit enim!" (Mt 28:6); cf. Lk 24:6. In Mk 16:6, the expression is more forceful and shorter: "He is risen, he is not here" (*surrexit, non est hic*).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Jn 16:7.

interpretation, in spite of my repeatedly saying that when the Son of Man comes he will not be here or there, but will be like the lightning that appears in the East and West alike.<sup>21</sup>

When it is said, "He is risen," we may perhaps understand that he is not here; he cannot be located with geographical categories or within merely historical parameters. It is as if the angel was saying that his true resurrection is his absence, his not being here or there. He is above limited human horizons, above theological and philosophical speculations, well above any kind of worship, and yet he is present in his absence and we do not need to discover "him" (as an object) in order for him to receive our acts, since anything we do to "the least of these" we do unto him.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, however, as the Christian liturgy stresses at Easter, quoting from a rather free though traditional version of the psalms of the Old Testament, "I am risen, and I am still with you."<sup>23</sup> Precisely because I am risen I am not here; yet precisely because I am risen, I can be with you. The presence of the living Christ is not that of an encroaching guardian or a vigilant eye, not even the ultimately alienating presence of an "Other," but the intimately liberating presence of an absence that allows us to grow, to become. The Eucharistic revelation is his disappearance: only when left with the bread alone did the disciples recognize him.<sup>24</sup>

This Christ is certainly the living Jesus, yet this in no way prevents *him* from being present and active under as many different *whats* as there are religious traditions.

Not all problems are answered, but a breakthrough may be in sight if the contemplative joins mind and heart with the active approach.

### Religious Understanding

*Loke'smin dvividhā niṣṭhā purā proktā mayā'nagha  
jñāna-yogena samikhyānām karma-yogena yoginām.*

In this world a twofold foundation  
was proclaimed by me—O blameless hero:  
the discipline of wisdom for men of reason,  
the discipline of action for active men.

—BG III.33

Οὐ πᾶς ὁ λέγων μοι· Κύριε Κύριε,  
εἰσελεύσεται εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν,  
ἀλλὰ ὁ ποιῶν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου. . . .

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Mt 24:23–27.

<sup>22</sup> See Mt 15:31ff.

<sup>23</sup> "Resurrexi et adhuc tecum sum." Introit to the Easter Liturgy of the Latin rite.

Cf. Ps 138 (139):18.

<sup>24</sup> See Lk 24:31.

Not everyone who calls "Lord, Lord"  
will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but  
only those who do the will of my Father. . . .

—Mt 7:21<sup>25</sup>

### *Necessary but Insufficient Categories*

The contemplative sees: he intuits the truth; he attains a certain immediacy that makes him a mystic. But the mystic ceases to be such the moment he speaks.

Speech irradiates his experience but also dissipates it. The Word is the firstborn of the Father,<sup>26</sup> the firstborn of the universal order,<sup>27</sup> but words are only broken fragments of that Word, and each human language is only one channel, a given system incarnating a particular cultural and religious world.

How is the contemplative to express himself if he can do so only in the language of his time and place? Each word he utters will sound like a lie to him as soon as his speech is taken literally. No living word is ever literal. On the other hand, the active method is just as insufficient as it is necessary. Without it there would be little interaction, but by itself it achieves understanding only at the heavy price of the surrender of one of the parties, who must submit to the rules of the encounter proposed by the other, thereby reducing its role to that of serving the interests of the other.

This latter attitude, which we describe in such a brief and crude way, is far from being unreal. Today much religious dialogue is unconsciously so directed that it becomes possible only when one of the parties plays the role of servant. To ask, for instance, how Christianity may be better known in the Arabic world—and how it might learn from the Muslim experience so as to benefit from the positive riches of Muslim spirituality—would be one such example.<sup>28</sup>

### *Complementary Methods*

What is needed is a twofold approach. On the one hand we need the contemplative, steeped in more than one religious world, who has achieved this wider experience not as an interesting experiment but as an excruciating yet liberating personal experience, and who at the same time has the necessary skill and intelligence to

<sup>25</sup> Non omnis qui dicit mihi, Domine, Domine intrabit in regnum caelorum; sed qui facit voluntatem Patris mei. . . .

<sup>26</sup> Only-Begotten (μονογενής) cf. Jn 1:14; 1:18; 3:16; 3:18; Heb 11:17; 1 Jn 4:9. Firstborn (πρωτότοκος) cf. Rom 8:29; Col 1:15; 1:18; Heb 1:6; Rv 1:5.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. the *prathamajā rtasya* in RV I.164.37; AV II.1.4.

<sup>28</sup> For a general treatment of the problem, see my essay, "The Rules of the Game in the Religious Encounter," in *Intrareligious Dialogue*.

express himself in more than one theological and religious system.<sup>29</sup> We also need the contemplative to show us that, in the encounter of religions and cultures, harmony does not imply uniformity, and metaphysical oneness does not imply administrative union. Precisely because the contemplative vision discovers the oneness amid the variegated multiformity of things and appearances, it does not tend to render them uniform. External similarity is not essential for the recognition of a deeper unity. The contemplative, to use an example from Christian ecumenism, would not push for one single administrative ecclesiastical body, but would emphasize ecclesial and sacramental unity. Here the church is seen not so much as an *organization* but as an *organism*—flexible, open, and vital.<sup>30</sup>

The contemplative also offers a salutary corrective to the haste and desire of the active approach for tangible results. Many frustrations appear because we tend to overlook and overvalue the factor of time. Peace, harmony, and understanding cannot be achieved overnight. The results of millennia cannot be dealt with without accounting for the factor of time and the natural rhythms of history. On the other hand, if the hoped-for results are delayed, the contemplative insight prevents us from being discouraged or frustrated. It is only natural that the spiritual realization of an interior oneness is closer at hand than its external manifestations. Moreover, the heart and mind of the true contemplative hold more than a private dream: it is an anticipation of a real state of affairs. The contemplative has thus a priestly-prophetic role: he mediates between issues previously irreconcilable and anticipates a new age by realizing in his inner being what one day may also have historical repercussions. What happens in the contemplative's mind and heart may later irradiate on a greater scale when the time is ripe.

But another task is still to be performed. Alone, the contemplative easily overlooks or neglects other important dimensions of reality. Man also needs systems of thought, structures for action, and institutions to live in. These are the provinces of the active approach. Therefore, the contemplative and the person of action have to be involved in a dialogical (and not merely a dialectical) dialogue, in order that the contributions of both may play their part in the growth of Man into the fullness of his own being.

What criterion can coordinate the active and contemplative approaches? How is mere understanding going to affect actual life; how is active interference going to modify the contemplative insight? To return to an earlier example, I may be convinced that Muslims are right to worship the form of God that they do and to believe the tenets they hold; further, I may, in a way, share in their belief from my point of view, but this may not be sufficient nor make it desirable for me to join the Muslim religion in a formal way. Acknowledging a certain transcendental unity of all creeds or the relative validity of all religions, important as this step may be, does not solve the problem of a divided humankind, for the ideological aspect of

<sup>29</sup> Cf. my treatment, albeit dated, of this issue in my "Indian Letters," *Offenbarung und Verkündigung* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976), 48–55.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. R. Panikkar, "Il sogno di una chiesa Indiana," in *La nuova innocenza*, vol. 2 (Sotto il Monte-Bergamo: Cens-Servitium, 1994), 157–94.

the different traditions may be at variance or even in conflict. The two methods are complementary, but the complementarity cannot be articulated in any strategic or schematic way. Here we could apply the injunction not to be anxious about tomorrow, but have confidence that tomorrow will look after itself.<sup>31</sup>

### *An Ongoing Process*

Action and contemplation have to join hands in an act of cosmic, human, and divine trust. No person, no religion, no one way of life has the right to set the rules for this encounter. We must all recognize our insufficiency; this humble but true recognition may then put us on the right path, leading toward a new step in human growth. Recognition of the fact that we are in an ongoing process of which we are not the masters amounts to an awareness of the radical relativity of our human situation, from which we can in no way escape. There is no such thing as an "absolute standpoint." So-called pure objectivity belongs to the myth of science, having no place in the encounter of religions and cultures. Even a divine revelation is mediated by our reception of it and the words we may use to describe it, so that we can no longer totally distinguish the absolute element from our understanding of it. What we can do is become more and more aware of our situation and thus of our insufficiency, maintaining ourselves in an attitude of hope, a mood of expectancy. This attitude makes interreligious dialogue and the common search for truth one of the purest religious acts today. It entails not only confidence in my neighbor (impossible without love and understanding) but also faith in something that transcends us both, whatever name or no-name we may use for it.

To sum up this complex issue, we return to the two maxims of this study.

Any ultimate problem—reality, truth, *brahman*, the mystery of life, existence, human nature, God—is certainly "not understood by those who understand," for their understanding of the mystery is reduced to their capacity to understand and is thus incomplete. Those who understand do not really completely understand; they understand only from their particular angle or from their own understanding. They understand only what they are capable of understanding, and no one person or human group can pretend to have exhausted the understanding of truth. *Brahman*, or any ultimate thing, which by this very fact would also encompass the subject, cannot be an object of anything and thus cannot be the object of any understanding. How can you know the knower?<sup>32</sup> If you happened to know it, it would no longer be the knower, but the "known." You can only know along with the knower, but you cannot know it. It would be like looking for darkness with a lamp.

Moreover, "It is understood by those who do not understand."

And here we should take the message literally. True, authentic nonunderstanding is real understanding; it is the act of truly "standing under" reality and, in a way,

<sup>31</sup> See Mt 6:34.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. BU II.4.14.

being its foundation. The text does not say that reality is understood by those who "understand that they do not understand." Those are the intellectuals—the more or less conceited, if intelligent, people who play with the knowledge of their "ignorance." Those who are conscious of their own ignorance only play at being humble; they certainly do not understand anything. If you understand that you do not understand, you certainly understand your lack of understanding. Those who really understand do not know that they do not understand, which is already a form of comprehension. Real ignorance or true knowledge cannot be feigned. There is no possible pretense here. All that we are able to know is not ultimate knowledge. Ultimate knowledge is innocent: it does not know that it does not know. It knows without knowing it. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" could be another way of saying this.

The second text echoes the *Upaniṣad* collections and is orchestrated by another series of sayings in the New Testament.<sup>33</sup> It has the same purpose. The two greatest values of Man, wisdom and prudence—or intellect and acuteness—are here hopelessly shattered. There is no escape. The wisdom of the wise and the intelligence of the prudent, He, the Lord, will destroy. He will apparently make no use of any human value, nor will he build where others have built. The kingdom is a new creation—out of nothing. It is the foolishness of the cross, the weakness according to the world, the stupidity of Man that he will extol. Obviously, in the moment when we want to understand or defend those words we contradict ourselves, for if we succeed in making sense of them, we will have overcome foolishness and will have begun to manipulate the foolishness of the cross as if it were only for others and not for us as well. If we take refuge with the scum of the world and begin, remembering the words of Paul, to feel comfortable there, then we become the worst of hypocrites, playing the publican and choosing the last places with the secret desire to be praised or to be asked to come up higher.

What does this mean? What can we know? It means we know that our knowledge is broken, fragmentary, and distorted; we also know that the refractions of our angles may be corrected by the diffractions of our brother's or sister's, and that those whom I may be inclined to consider valueless and of no interest may also contribute efficaciously to the weave of the multicolored tunic of humankind. We know that we have no right to despise anything or discard anyone. We have neither the right to judge others nor to judge ourselves. We know that we must renounce the pronouncement of ultimate and final affirmations (including the ones made here), so as not to reject those who make them. What emerges here is an intuition of the *pratītyasamutpāda*, the radical relativity of all that is.<sup>34</sup>

I am pleading neither for an undifferentiated irenicism nor for the elimination of the criteria of truth or consistency. We must stick to the latter precisely because we cannot do without them. I express my opposition to any kind of idolatry, to put

<sup>33</sup> See 1 Cor 1:18ff.

<sup>34</sup> This contemplative vision of the radical interdependence of all things is the central intuition of Buddhism. See my discussion of this in *Il silenzio del Buddha*, op. cit.

the same idea in traditional terms. I am trying to make room for the contemplative approach but not by saying that the contemplative has to be received with full honors, as if he were on a higher plane than the others. I am only reflecting on those powerful words, because to put them into practice requires the supreme power of powerlessness: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."





## SECTION II

### CONTEMPLATION



## MEDITATION WITHOUT OBJECT

If I am right in my thesis that the division between thinking and being, for all its subsequent reworking, is not in fact a universal human phenomenon but a specific feature of the "self-unravelling of reality" in the Western branch of Indo-European culture, it could shed light on a central question within mysticism over all time: the conflict between mysticism and rational thought, or *ratio*. Mysticism seems to go in a direction contrary to that of thought: not toward Being (as though we were dealing with a rediscovery or a redemption of Being) but starting from Being, as if it were a dissipation (or a sacrifice) of Being. Mysticism does not aspire to "think" Being, but to "let it be"; it does not seek to get inside it (to investigate truth, to know reality), but rather it lets the being itself come out (lets truth reveal itself and reality happen) and freely runs its own course.

A monk, when truly absorbed in meditation, does not know he is praying; the emptiness of real meditation certainly is not the thought of the absence of thought. Reflection kills the spontaneity of genuine contemplation. There is neither thinker nor thought; those who know do not know that they know. These and similar affirmations are at the center of nearly all mystical schools. How can this be explained? The example of the *bhārata-nāṭyam* dance of southern India can perhaps help us to clarify the question metaphorically. Above all, the dancer must be alone, or rather must be "all one." Her lover is not simply absent: he has to be there but cannot appear on his own. In a certain sense he is present in the dancer herself and acts through her. She incarnates him without dualism in the moment when her partner, the God Kṛṣṇa, was visible outside of the movement and the mimic of the dancer. She, too, is not there as herself but only as an epiphany of the divinity. She is alone, without spectators or "observers," but both are present: first in the temple (today a theatre) and second in the *mūrti*, in the icon. The dancer cannot "think" about the audience, but neither does she "think" about her God. This dance is not the adoration of another, an homage or a prayer—rather, it is the manifestation of the divine dance, of divine action. Such a dance is pure expression, immaculate revelation, naked irradiation of energy, magnificence of the creator or of the lover. The dancer's <sup>1</sup> movements have

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<sup>1</sup> In the temple of Chidambaram in southern India, where Śiva, under the well-known form of Naṭarāja, performs the cosmotheandric dance, a legend recounts that the Goddess Kālī was not admitted, because during the dance performance with Śiva she became

no "meaning"; that is, they are not signs that point to something else. They are not movements born of thought, or that thought would empty. Any explanation is equivalent to a degeneration of the dance. The dance must not be rationally deciphered but just represented, unravelled, revealed. The movement, that of the Spirit as well, does not proceed from the outside in, from what is loved toward the sentiment or desire of the dancer. It is not a movement of comprehension, of thought, of the search for meaning, but of a revelation from the inside out, with no return. The dance movement is pure expression and not the response to an impression. It is true creation from nothing. The dancer is wholly in her dance, not in ecstasy before God: it is God, rather, who directly uses the dancer to reveal himself.

The dancer must neither think of nor worship God. Her task is simply that of letting herself be moved by the divinity, becoming engrossed and remaining in that state of pure possession of the divine dance. Such a scene cannot be the result of a premeditated decision or an act of will. That is why the training is so difficult. The dancer does not learn in the usual sense; she does not have to express or represent something. She has to, in some way, empty herself and be completely passive and receptive—but not the kind of passivity that can be fertilized by any kind of activity. If that was the idea, she would lose her virginity, her spontaneity, and her innocence. In this sense the guru is essential. He bears the burden of the reflection and the emergent thoughts of the dancer, who in turn listens to and obeys only the guru. When she can go on no longer, no deliberate action can help her. The dance may then become art, but it stops being *bhārata-nāṭyam*, the divine dance.

The question then becomes whether a pure manifestation, an unreflected phenomenon, is possible. What happens with Being? Does Being reflect or think? Or does it simply become irreversibly lost, submerged in nothingness?

The dilemma is inevitable: Either Being thinks itself or it does not. If it does, thought is uniform with Being, expresses Being, and makes it intelligible. In this sense Being is thinkable, and the laws of thought are at the same time the laws of Being. As we think, we participate in Being. Truth is the bridge over which we *become*. We reach Being.

If Being does not think itself, then there is not complete conformity: thought (even pure theory) cannot entirely exhaust Being, nor can it mirror it perfectly. Being manifests, unravels, and expresses itself in a mode that thought cannot follow. An outflowing of Being takes place that thought cannot reach, on which it cannot reflect, and that becomes lost, so to speak. Such an outflowing is so unique that it cannot be repeated even once; in fact, its repetition is impossible.

"Meditation without object" would be taking part in this flow of Being that becomes lost in the Being that we cannot think nor determine; becoming conscious of this flow is impossible, given that this meditation is a pure participation in the unravelling of a wholeness without reference to itself. To reflect "afterward" on such a

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conscious that a certain movement of his legs was not pleasing to her as a woman. . . . The Self is consciousness, but "self-consciousness" destroys it.

"meditation free from thought" would mean that it was not, in fact, empty and pure, since I can remember it—or indeed go back mentally in some way and retrieve it.

The act of thinking prejudices that which is being thought. The object of a thought—being thereby fixed, or at least altered—can no longer move, transform, or explain itself freely.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it has to mold itself to what is being thought about it; otherwise it would not be *that* thing being thought, but another. The principle of identity certainly makes thinking possible, but at the cost of immobilizing Being. A Being that is thought remains so forever, and what is thought is of a regular nature. When I think, I can even, perhaps, create Being. In any case, one thing remains beyond my power: to render unthought that which has been thought.

The direction of the movement of contemplation without object is contrary to that of the movement of thought. Meditation is not like reflecting upon something, even if that something was the infinite self-revelation of God. Neither is meditation like trying to overtake thought by leaping or causing a leap outside its own limits. The movement of contemplation without thought is precisely the opposite: it comes from mystery, from Being itself. The one who prays does not speak, but listens in pure obedience (*ob-audire*). He lets the stream of mystery (of love, grace, knowledge, light, Being, God) flow through him.

But beware! Such contemplation cannot have anything to observe. Otherwise, indeed, the observed would determine the observer and thus not only deprive him of his freedom but also provide an "object"—that is, a typical element of thought. A God who is an object of observation is no longer a living God, the masters would say. And if the one who observes is no longer such a "living" being, far less so is the God being observed. Pure contemplation does not contemplate; rather, it does not contemplate *anything*. There is no object, and equally there is no subject—no support or point from which to contemplate, no *pratiṣṭhā*, no foundation, only the abyss.

But then, either the whole idea of meditation free of thought, contemplation without object, vision without image, and so on is nothing more than a projection of the unrequited human spirit—the result of the pride of its own representations—or we must somehow recognize that reality is not completely intelligible, that Being and thought are not simply identical. This also means that no monotheism can admit such contemplation, and if a Trinitarian religion recognizes such an experience without object, then it cannot be reduced to monotheism.

In any case, we cannot do away with thought quite so easily. An unthinkable Being is an absurd contradiction, because as soon as I assert its unthinkableness it is as though I simultaneously claim it to be thinkable, inasmuch as it is unthinkable. In other words, if reality is considered as Being, then the Being is taken to be substantial, and at that point it is difficult to deny that this Being can have a corresponding thought. Thought cannot be eliminated and must necessarily find its basis in Being. We could say that our thought is not potent enough to think Being,

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<sup>2</sup> There is no need for recourse to Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy to find such a metaphor in science.

the cause being human weakness, that we are blinded by the Light, and so on, but in the end we shall be forced to admit that Being is thinkable, that ultimate reality is intelligible—the *noēsis noēseōs* of Aristotle. In this light, an act free from thought cannot represent a definitive acquisition.

We have to take one further step: only if Being is, so to speak, hanging in a void; only if it is harbored in silence; or, in even more paradoxical language, only if Being is imbued with nothingness can one speak of a radical unthinkableness: *nairātmyavāda*. We need to be aware that the doctrine of a spirituality without object is far from being just a spiritual technique, more or less efficacious, but is a fundamental vision of ultimate reality. All else is mere dabbling.

To put it more simply: What thought can always be is not just a reality but that on which reality is founded. And even if it were only an illusion, the foundation of the illusion must be the ultimate, only one possible. We have called this foundation *Being*. Being and thought correspond. Maybe our thought does not have the ability to exhaust Being; maybe it is subject to influences that render it somewhat unreliable, but Being and thought must correspond in principle, must be coextensive. Being is thinkable and manifests itself in thought. Spiritual manifestations of this kind would be the *logos*, the Son, Sofia, *prajñā*, *cit*. If Being is knowledge, no unconscious Being is possible. There would be no Being.

The assumption of any kind of metaphysics as the basis for a spirituality of "meditation free from thought" cannot contradict what we have just stated without eliminating itself. That is to say, where thought is precluded, Being is necessarily also excluded. In principle, an unthinkable Being cannot exist. If there were something unthinkable, it could not be Being. Thus, nothingness enters into metaphysics. Ontology is not abolished, but the unthinkable presupposes a Non-Being. But "nothing" cannot exist and therefore is unthinkable. Nonthought encounters nothingness. "Meditation without object," as it is usually understood, cannot encounter Being and cannot reach God—assuming that God is the Supreme Being; it can only "touch on" nothingness. Of course, nothingness cannot be represented artificially, as a super-being, a sub-being, or a primordial Being. Nothingness is not—in any way at all. But what does this all mean?

Perhaps a metaphor can help us understand. Being is the world visible to thought. Thought is the light that makes it so. World means visible world and light means light that makes it visible. There is no world without light, and light is the first power of the world. World and light correspond. But if there were to be a shadow side (of the world), this would not be visible as such, and would not even be world. To light it up would imply that it no longer is in shadow. Lighting up darkness as such is impossible; it would cease to be darkness. Therefore to talk about the "dark side" is reasonable only as a pure possibility, but the dark must be left to its darkness. I can neither see nor think this darkness. So, how do I come to know about the darkness, the unknowable? In fact, I know nothing about it; I just talk about it as a pure possibility that would disappear as such if the world (Being) occupied it. Therefore, we are talking about what we do not know, about an experience that we say is unthinkable.

Being and thinking correspond, but talking seems to fall outside this correspondence. Thus, people often talk about something they say can be talked about, but not thought. But what cannot be thought would be nothingness. What are we thinking of if we talk about nothingness? Nothingness! So how can we talk about it? We just do. What is the difference, then, between a meaningless discourse and an "unthought" word? A meaningless discourse is contradictory and bears no relation to the context. The unthought word of a genuine experience "without object" can have meaning, beauty, and force; can make something happen; is real. The word (*dabar, vāc, logos*) is the mediator that is at the origin of Being: the "arch-initial" Being, the firstborn of the truth (*ṛta*). Language is more powerful than Being; it embraces nothingness, in that it is possessed by silence.

The complete word (which includes in itself the speaker, what is spoken about, who is spoken to, and the language) symbolizes the perfect *quaternitas* of Being and reaches a profound infinity in all its dimensions: I, Spirit (intelligible World), You, and World (matter). But what is unprecedented in reality is the ability of the (human) spirit to move the center of gravity toward its source, toward the "prime" origin of the originated, toward the "prime" silence of the word, toward the "prime" nothingness of Being. It is superfluous to add that this "prime" is not to be understood in a temporal or spatial sense, nor in an ontological one. A pre-being, indeed, would just be yet another way of being, just like a "next world" of Being. The dimension of nothingness, to put it like that, is just that void that makes possible the harmonic equilibrium. Here we can only make a mention of the problem of *radical relativity* and the *pratītyasamutpāda*.

Without examining this basic assumption in greater detail, we can ask ourselves: What would be the attitude of a similar human activity? The first, provisional observation is of a grammatical nature. Terms like "consideration," "meditation," "attention," "contemplation," "concentration," "prayer," and such presuppose a dualism between subject and object that the practices themselves purport to overcome. In truth, mystics often use other: "transport," "ecstasy," "intoxication," "raptus (rapture)," "possession," "illumination," and others. Such expressions are not to be interpreted as activities but rather as different forms of passivity: the *pati divina* of many mystical schools. Here, the behavior associated with such expressions has to be based on passivity—on expectation and hope. Two aspects should be clarified, however: above all, the "expectation" is not the expectation of a concrete object, and the "hope" is not the hope to see one's desires realized. Second, the behavior itself would be lost immediately if emphasis were placed on duty or if one became conscious of it. If I want to keep an open mind or aspire to openness, I cease to be unconditionally open and remain receptive only to that circumstance that I consider open. I am thus closed to all that is not in accord with it. So, are we just asked to have blind faith? Not at all. As soon as I recognize that my faith must be blind, I actually render it blind and thus destroy it. The ultimate things cannot be manipulated. The ultimate horizon is the kingdom of pure Grace, according to many theologians from East and West alike. The soul is the bride, but the bride just needs to be loved—so say other *āchārya* (masters) and saints.

It may be that all things can be related to all others, but the objection will be raised that in this way all criteria for verifying the authenticity of experience will vanish, giving way to every form of irrationality. Yet is it unreasonable to expect a justification, or at least an explanation? Or is this need, in fact, the thirst for the divine in Man? That thirst is unquenchable, in that it cannot reach any definitive certainty.

The other bank of the river is invisible and therefore unreachable with thought. But the mystic makes that his experience. His thirst is quenched, leaving behind great peace and joy (*ānanda*).



## 6

### THE ORIGIN

#### *Silence*

*In silentio et in spe  
erit fortitudo vestra*

In silence and in hope  
will be your strength

—Is 30:15

Silence is a symbol that has various dimensions or layers and therefore points in different directions. It draws its strength from whatever life situation it is in contact with at any one time. Life can be lived at varying depths. What we call "silence" comes from these different depths of life, and if we so wish, it can guide us through them.

Along the same lines as the four states of *Brahman* (Being)—wakefulness, dreams, deep sleep without dreams, and the state beyond all other states<sup>1</sup>—we can distinguish four distinct moments in silence.

1. *The suffocation of words.* Falling silent despite having plenty to say. Falling silent for reasons of prudence, caution, or fear. This silence is really a kind of silencing. It wields a certain violence and takes the breath away. It calculates while distinguishing and dividing. In dividing, it isolates the living being and cuts off the living breath. It blocks the flow of life.

2. *The bewilderment of words.* Falling silent for lack of appropriate words. Falling silent from disorientation, incompetence, or foolishness. This silence results in distance and flees from contact. It leads to the atrophy and consumption of living relations. Where there is isolation, death lies in wait.

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<sup>1</sup> *MandU* III–VII.

3. *The inadequacy of words.* Falling silent when realizing that we are caught up in something inexpressible. Falling silent because of the impossibility of expressing that which has been experienced. We have the feeling of the ineffable, and we are conscious of it. This is the silence that remains speechless. It is stupor before the mystery. The danger is that of stiffening and being blocked. It is here that Man, mostly unconsciously, has to make a decision: affirm life or choose rationality. Rationality: The attempt to translate what is ineffable into words and concepts. Life: The risk of being swept away by the ineffable and remaining in silence. This brings us to the fourth distinction.

4. *The absence of words.* Here silence is not a "being in silence," going quiet amid the confusion. Neither is it falling silent because one has nothing to say. It is rather falling silent because there is nothing to say, or as another *Upaniṣad* puts it,<sup>2</sup> because "what the word does not say" is (*brahman*). Here the word does not exhaust reality. The silence is the silence of the word. The word is no longer present. Only the silence remains. It is not the annihilation of the word but its absence—since nothing more than that is presented. Now we shall have to deal with this fourth modality of silence: "What cannot be spoken of" (Wittgenstein) is exactly that which must be experienced as silence.

Can Man express silence, that silence which cannot be spoken of, or is this a contradiction in itself? When we are no longer able to articulate any proposition because there is nothing utterable or unutterable—even the unutterable, at least as such, is utterable—then silence is revealed. Therefore, silence is not what we discover as unutterable but rather what we can grasp as unsaid. This grasping belongs to the "*logos* of silence," as Plotinus said.<sup>3</sup> But what we thus grasp—with the *logos*—is not the word, but the silence. At this deeper level, word and silence—as we shall see further—go together. Precisely the intimate relation between word and silence allows us to speak of silence without contradiction.

Some schools of meditation speak about the absence of thoughts, an absence that of course can only be temporary, since Man is a thinking being. An empty consciousness is certainly a consciousness that is free of thought contents, but it is still the consciousness of a conscious being—that is, of a "Being." In a Christian sense, Being is the *logos*—the Word, and the Word is word because it speaks. The *logos*, or Being, is not silent; rather, it comes out of silence. True silence has nothing in common with Being. This is the great challenge, and at the same time the supreme revelation, of silence.

Within the bounds of a rigid monotheism, this silence is equivalent to Non-Being, and is therefore almost blasphemous, since God *is*; in the final analysis, Non-Being is an impossibility. This point may explain why mystical silence so often appears suspicious if not downright threatening. Only within a Trinitarian vision of reality does it make sense to speak of silence at this final level.

"In the beginning was the word," say the *Vedas*, the Gospel, and some African traditions. But the divine word was not—is not—the "beginning," the origin, or

<sup>2</sup> *KenU*I.5.

<sup>3</sup> *Enneads* III.8.6:11.

the *archē*. The *logos* is Being, since "everything was made through him."<sup>4</sup> The *logos* is therefore the Being that ensures that everything exists. But the source of the *logos* is not Being, just as the source of the river is not the river itself. The source of Being is the silence, the void from which the word was generated. From the silence of the Father came the word. Ignatius of Antioch says, "Christ, the *logos* of God, comes from silence."<sup>5</sup> Word and silence are therefore in a relationship that is not dialectical but dialogical—Trinitarian. They are not mutually exclusive but actually inclusive of each other. This is the *perichoresis* of patristics: being one *in* the other. The void is not Non-being, the annihilation of Being, or its contradiction. The void is not *niente*, *néant*, *nothingness*; "void" is rather the *not yet*, what *has not become*, as is suggested by the etymology of the Spanish word *nada*: the *non natum*, a primordial absence, the not-yet-being of Being—because without the "yet," we cannot even think of it.

Only a Trinitarian or a-dual (*advaita*) experience can perceive that the void is the other pole, the second "point of rotation" (*polus*), without which there cannot be the first, Being, the *logos*. We cannot "see" one pole, as such, without the other. But this also means that the *reductio ad unum*, the reduction of multiplicity to unity, as a mere intellectual pretext, cannot happen. For this reason, many traditions speak of the need for a "third eye" to avoid distorting reality. Only thus is the a-dual experience of all reality possible, and without it the experience of the Trinity cannot be had. When the third eye is closed, the a-dual experience cannot just be called up beyond our senses and reason. We need all five of our senses fully prepared, as well as clarity of thought and purity of reason, for the opening of the third eye to take place.

Silence is the experience of the void and of the source that is "before" the coming of the *logos*. This experience can only be generated in the Holy Spirit—that is to say, in the Trinitarian realm of mutually intimate relations—since that "before," relative to the birth of the *logos*, is not, of course, to be taken in the temporal sense. It is an immediate sighting, an immediate experience of all, of everything concretely—in a human being who is loved, in a flower, a rock, a dream, or a taste. In the immediate contact, Man is surrounded by everything and at the same time *is* everything. In the immediacy of the encounter, human experience changes into pure experience. The dualistic human experience vanishes. He who experiences is no longer an individual. It is experience in the Holy Spirit. This experience provides evidence for the fact of a bond between the utterable and the unutterable, between form and nonform, between word and silence, between Being and the void.

The union between word and silence today constitutes perhaps the most important challenge for a fruitful encounter between the Abrahamic and Asiatic forms of spirituality. The "fatigue [tension] of concept" needs to be overcome in the Spirit in order to clear up the numerous misunderstandings and to promote cross-fertilization between these two great traditions of humanity. This ontological "absence" is a homeomorphic equivalent of the *śūnyatā* of eastern Asia. The "emptiness" has nothing to do with Western nihilism. The divine can only be perceived in silence, which is

<sup>4</sup> Jn 1:3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ad Magn.* 8.2 (PG 5.669).

where almost all spiritual traditions come together. "The words of the wise are heard in silence," as the Septuagint has it.<sup>6</sup> As the Bible says, and Christian liturgy recalls at Christmas, "When peaceful silence lay over all, and night had run the half of her swift course, down from the heavens, from the royal throne, leapt your all-powerful Word."<sup>7</sup> Silence is the empty space in the intimacy of our being, the void that "makes space" for *theosis*—for divinization. In this empty space we can receive the word, the *logos* that comes from silence, and with it also silence itself. This receiving can only take place in a "virginal" way. Virginity is the symbol of openness to the void, to vigilance, to expansiveness and to presence—receiving the word and letting it be incarnated in us, unravelling and doing its work. "And the word was made flesh." Such is the destiny of every Man and of every word.

"In silence and in hope will be your strength," says the prophet Isaiah.<sup>8</sup> This means letting ourselves be transformed in order to be reborn from the Spirit, because "the whole of creation is waiting with eagerness for the children of God to be revealed."<sup>9</sup> Such a manifestation seems necessary today more than ever; indeed, we can only overcome today's critical situations (dealings between people—in politics, ecology, religion, or any other context in which they occur) if we dare to open ourselves to this mystical dimension of reality and if we also dare to introduce ourselves to the experience of immediate understanding. In this way we embrace that vibration, that breath that sustains us and makes our life fruitful. We are embracing a latent dimension of reality that is not yet entirely realized, a creative force that transforms, reveals, and creates life. Silence is the power of mysticism, and without mysticism Man is merely a rational animal and religion just a system of thought. And without the transforming power of silence—if we refuse to embrace it—we would be heading for disaster. All our dignity and responsibility lie here. In this dialogical creative work, God is also involved. We are, in collaboration with God, the shapers and craftsmen of our life and of every life that is in relation with us. We must be uniquely what is expressed in the symbol of incarnation. In watchful waiting, we must be unconditionally open and receptive; we must grasp the word, the *logos*, from silence, and let it germinate within us; we must let the silence of the *logos* reveal itself and do its work, let ourselves be transformed, and (when the time is ripe) give birth to a new divine life.

### The Word of Silence

Only the word that comes from silence is a true word that communicates something.

The word of silence does not mean a "word *about* silence," but the silence that is in every word. It does not mean "silent word" but "word that belongs to silence"—word made of silence.

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<sup>6</sup> Qo 9:17.

<sup>7</sup> Ws 18:14–15.

<sup>8</sup> Is 30:15 in the Vulgate.

<sup>9</sup> Rom 8:19.

We can certainly speak about silence, just as we can speak about what happened yesterday or any other topic. But in this case the silence we are speaking about is not a real silence, because silence is not an *object* (about which we can think or speak). We cannot speak about real silence, precisely because searching for shadows with a torch in our hand is impossible. We cannot speak about silence without destroying it, because silence is incompatible with speech.

We can, however, speak about silence in another way: circumscribing it by allusion and speaking of what borders with silence but is not actually silence. We can describe the areas adjacent to silence and point out what leads to silence, what originates from it, and what surrounds it—in the same way that we can suppose we are surrounded by shadow when our flickering lamp does not light up our whole field of view.

But we can also do more than that: we can let silence break through into word and speak with simplicity and truth. Every true word is true inasmuch as it comes out of silence. Further still, it is a true word precisely because it *is* silence (spoken). And the Silence was made Word—and began to speak!

The word is the sacrifice of silence. It is silence that produces the word through self-immolation. When the word appears, silence no longer exists—but the word is there, bearing all that silence *can* express; the word is all that silence is—but then silence is no longer. In its place there *is* only word.

We mortals, however, cannot pronounce that Word. Who can be the word of silence? In Indic revelation, *Vāc*: “The Word is the First-born of Truth.”<sup>10</sup> Through the Word everything was created; as a *Brāhmaṇa* also says, “*Vāc* was next to God”:

He (in the beginning) was the only Lord of the universe. His Word was with him. This word was his second. He contemplated. He said, “I shall free (speak) this Word, so that it will produce and create this entire world.”<sup>11</sup>

As an *Upaniṣad* echoes, *Vāc* is Brahman.<sup>12</sup> It is the primordial word of the absolute.<sup>13</sup> It is *nityā vāc*, the “eternal word,” according to a famous mantra of the *R̥g-veda*.<sup>14</sup> In the inimitable language of the *Atharva-veda*,

That Sacred Word that was first born in the East  
The Seer revealed it from the shining horizon.  
He revealed his diverse aspects, high and low,  
The womb of the Existent and of the Non-Existent.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> TB II.8.8:5.

<sup>11</sup> TMB XX.14.2.

<sup>12</sup> BUI.3.21.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. BU IV.1.2.

<sup>14</sup> RV VIII.75.6.

<sup>15</sup> AV IV.1.1. The “Sacred Word” in this passage is *brahman*.

*Vāc* is truly “the womb of the universe,”<sup>16</sup> because “with his Word, and his Soul, he created the universe and all things that exist.”<sup>17</sup> No one can say that the Word is not held in the highest esteem:

The Word is infinite, immense, beyond all this . . .  
All the Gods, the celestial spirits, men  
And animals live in the Word.  
In the Word all worlds find their sustenance.<sup>18</sup>

The sacrifice of the Vedic *Prajāpati*, the total immolation of the Trinitarian Father, is the explosion of silence that produces the three worlds, articulating the *logos*.

In our age, still dominated by the *myth of science*, we constantly hear repeated this methodological advice: “Say everything you want to say, and in the clearest and most concise way you can.” Time is considered a factor extrinsic to the (temporal) object, something that can be shortened or lengthened without changing the said “thing.”

The advice in question presupposes, further, that all things can be expressed clearly. Because we take it for granted that truth is clear, we also expect the human mind to be clear, and darkness is considered “black”—bad and false. The Cartesian dogma of “clear and distinct ideas” is evident here, and it seems to me that this also constitutes the white man’s prejudice.

But are we really so sure that we are lords of time and masters of intelligibility, so much so that we feel obliged to formulate such a methodological rule? Are time and words really just instruments that we can use as we see fit? We should remember that the majority of human traditions, including the *śruti* and the Bible, say that God loves darkness.<sup>19</sup>

I would like, however, to pause and consider the first part of the rule: “Say everything you want to say.” Here we can recognize two assumptions:

1. That it is possible to say all that one wants to say
2. That it is possible to say everything: in other words, that everything can be said

The first assumption can be found in a phrase that we all use in a wide range of situations, perhaps unconsciously: “I wanted to say . . .,” to which one could easily reply, “Then why didn’t you?” In fact, we feel the need to punctuate our speech with phrases like, “You know what I mean?” or “I mean to say . . .,” because in reality we are unable to say what we would like to say, and I need to know what

<sup>16</sup> AB II.38.

<sup>17</sup> SB X.6.5:5. Cf. BU I.2.5.

<sup>18</sup> TB II.8.8:4.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. R Panikkar, *Il silenzio del Buddha* (Milan: Mondadori, 2006), which should obviate further references.

my interlocutor *means* to say despite the fact that he has not *said* it; he simply meant to say it.

Therefore a structural gap exists between meaning and saying. My interlocutor has to make the leap from his intended meaning to speech, and I have to make the leap to the meaning behind his speech, if it is to be speech about something—that is, if it expresses something that will become clear to me as having meaning for me, too.

A word hides just as much as it reveals, or rather, it reveals only as much as it hides—and what it “says” consists only of making the listener aware that something is being hidden from him.

Saying everything that we want to say is not possible. We can only say what we are capable of saying. We can only translate into space and time the meaning that we intend. This intention can be dressed in words, but it is precisely this dressing that is all that can be said, since a meaning without words cannot be said.

On the other hand, being aware of everything that is said is not possible. We intend only part of what we say, and we mean much more and much less than we say—a “more” and a “less” that we cannot ourselves control. The other, the interlocutor, tells us what has really been said.

The word is never a monologue; speaking is only such when we communicate something to someone. What we say has meaning only within a context, but the speaker cannot control his own context, far less the context of those who listen; they will insert the words he pronounces into their own context and understand them in relation to the forms of their own perception. What is said is not (or is no longer) the private property of the speaker.

By this we certainly do not mean to say that we are dealing with a nonverbal meaning that can later be translated. Speaking is not translation but rather expression, and expression belongs to the thing expressed. There are no meanings without words, for the very good reason that they could not be said.

The word is the symbol of what exists—and here we come to our second point.

As for the second assumption, not everything can be said: no “thing” is exhausted in the word that says it. Only the utterable can be said. But this “can” does not depend on our will. What we *want* to say already constitutes a nonauthentic word. The word that we *want* to say is not the true word. The true word is simply spoken—and speaks.

The true word does not break nor translate the silence. The word is not an instrument or a technique. The silence the word comes from, and that the word manifests, is not another “thing” or another “being”; if that were so, since it is already somehow thinkable and expressible, it would in turn be the manifestation of an even more primordial being, and so on, *ad infinitum*. The word is *precisely* silence in words, silence made word. It is the symbol of silence. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was in the beginning—but there is no beginning when there is no word. What has no beginning has no word. The word is coextensive with Being: Non-Being has no word; it is “nonword” and is not expressed or articulated verbally.

At this point let us stop for a moment and listen to a wonderful Maya creation hymn:

And so he came down  
 While the heavens collided with the earth.  
 They moved among the four lights,  
 Among the four layers of the stars.  
 The world was not illuminated;  
 There was no day, no night, no moon.  
 So they understood that the world was being created.  
 Then creation appeared in the world.<sup>20</sup>

If we want to speak about Being and Non-Being, we must realize that they are neither opposites nor contradictory. These two terms are not reducible to the abstract formula "A and non-A," because the "Non" of Non-Being does not constitute the negation of A. If all Being is to be found on the side of Being, then its negation is also on the same side, so that the "negation" implicit in "Non-Being" is not a negation (which belongs to Being).

If the Word is the organ of Being, and Non-Being cannot be conceived as negation of Being (which would constitute a contradiction in terms, since negation, in order to be effective, has to have real consistency and therefore be capable of existence); if Non-Being is *nonword*; if Being and its expression are coextensive . . . is there, then, any way out of this *aporia*?

At this point all dualistic models appear to be insufficient and give way to a Trinitarian kind of approach. Now, the authentic Trinitarian approach is ineffable and nondialectical (otherwise we would have the subordination of the Spirit to the *logos* and also of the *logos* to the Father).

Perhaps a cultural digression may shed some light on the issue.

In the dialectical approach, Man finds himself faced with a dilemma: He has to choose between the way of the *logos* and the way of the Spirit.

A significant passage in the *Satapatha-brāhmaṇa* recounts the struggle for supremacy between *vāc* and *manas*.<sup>21</sup> Of these two, the first is based on the fundamental value of image, formulation, expression, and word, while the second assumes the fundamental value of inspiration, experience, and dazzling light.

8. Now once there was a dispute between the Spirit and the Word as to which of them was the better. "I am excellent!" said the Spirit, and the Word said, "I am excellent!"

9. The Spirit said, "I am certainly better than you, because you express nothing that has not already been understood by me. Thus, since you only imitate what I do and simply follow me, I am surely better than you!"

10. The Word said, "I am surely better than you, because all that you know I make known and communicate."

<sup>20</sup> Cf. J. Bierhost in *The Trial of the Wind: American Indian Poems and Ritual Orations* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 3.

<sup>21</sup> The word *manas* in this context is better translated as "spirit" than as "mind."



11. So they went to see Prajāpati and ask his opinion. Prajāpati decided in favor of the Spirit, telling the Word, "Surely the Spirit is better than you, because you only imitate and follow what the Spirit does: and he who imitates and follows what another does is undoubtedly inferior."

12. As the Word had been thus rejected, he became ashamed and lost. The Word said to Prajāpati, "I shall never become the instrument of your oblation! I, whom you have rejected!" And so, whenever a sacrifice is made for Prajāpati, it is always done in a low voice because the Word refused to bring the oblation to Prajāpati.<sup>22</sup>

This text could easily represent the polarity intrinsic to Indo-European culture, with the West putting the emphasis on the *logos* and the East on the Spirit. No doubt, indeed, that in the West the *logos* has become *stronger*, while in the East the Spirit has been considered *better*—if we can be allowed such an excessively simple statement. Centuries of historical experience confirm that the Word is deep, yes, but also barren. In the true Trinitarian approach, the dilemma between Spirit and Word is resolved: There can be no true Word without Spirit, or Spirit without Word.<sup>23</sup>

The whole universe is gathered in unity by the sacrament of the Word and by the sacrifice of action.

The polarities we are speaking about do not constitute independent positions governed by the dialectical laws of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. They are neither independent nor interdependent, but intra-in-dependent. They are not mutually exclusive, so that they could be *aufgehoben* (removed or substituted), but mutually inclusive.

They need each other, and one cannot exist without the other. They are not part of a whole, but rather they are all in a part, the whole partly (seen).

Non-Being, to return to our example, is not a negative Being; it is not a question of a kind of mathematical zero that helps us in our calculations with mathematical infinity; neither is it the limit of Being, as though Being were limited by Non-Being. Non-Being does not enter into a dialectical process where one could almost manipulate Being on one side and Non-Being on the other. Non-Being is silence, and its relation with Being (the Word) is not one of opposition but of *origination*—and simply returning to the origin is not possible. We carry our origins with us as we go forward. As soon as we realize this, we become aware that this cosmic, human, and divine pilgrimage is full of origins and beginnings. It will no longer suffice to repeat words, simply go back to silence, but we will enter into a dance where silence and nonsilence, Being and Non-Being form part of a whole of which we will be aware only after having *realized* it—with all the errors that that entails—and not before.

The polarities we are talking about constitute the nature of reality. They need each other and exist only in contrast—in dialogue and in mutual dependence. In fact, they are not two (of anything), but neither are they one. The dichotomy between

<sup>22</sup> SB I.4, 5, 8–12.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. R. Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man: Icon—Person—Mystery* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973).

"one and many" represents the great sophism of the mind: something that the mind is not capable of applying to itself.

God would not be God if there were no creatures, and vice versa. Good would not exist if evil was not one of its possibilities, and vice versa. Freedom would be just an empty concept if the need for it was not there, and vice versa. Salvation would have no meaning if the opposite possibility was not real.

But all this has no meaning unless we guard against substantivizing one of the poles, or considering their relation as secondary or subsidiary to their (independent) existence. A Being without relations, like an unspoken word, is a pure contradiction.

As a result, only a holistic viewpoint does justice to reality, and any analysis is methodologically inadequate on this perception of reality, because the whole is something more than just the sum of its parts (which is the same as saying that the entirety of the parts analyzed would never be able to give reality).

Coming back to where we started, we could say that the relation between silence and word is an a-dual relation: neither monism nor dualism, therefore, can do justice to a proper interpretation of them.

An intrinsic and constitutive polarity subsists between silence and word. Neither exists without the other, and the one makes the other possible. They are not enemies, just as they are not incompatible. Of course, there are elusive silences and repressive silences, just as there are empty words and meaningless chatter. Only these words and silences, equally inauthentic, are in discord. But every authentic silence is pregnant with words that will come to birth at the right time. Every authentic word is full of silence, which gives life to the word itself. Would that our words were always words of silence, and our silence always the virginal womb that has no word because it simply has nothing to say.

### **The Silence of the Word**

With the following fundamental reflection about the nature and power of silence, I do not want to communicate thoughts, but life. Words, if they are genuine, should be the revelation of silence.

From a Christian point of view it is perhaps appropriate to remember this warning from the Gospel of Matthew: "So I tell you this, that for every unfounded word people utter they will answer on Judgment Day, since it is by your words you will be justified, and by your words condemned."<sup>24</sup>

### **Silence Does Not Speak**

Silence says nothing. And it says nothing because it has nothing to say. Otherwise it would say something. To say nothing, in order to hide something from another person, is an artificial silence—a keeping silent, but not silence.

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<sup>24</sup> Mt 12:36–37.

Birds do not speak our human language because they do not have anything to say. Everything they have to "say" they sing, and they make themselves understood in their own way.

Silence says nothing, perhaps because it is the nothing that "says" silence. I mean that the nothing is silent and can only be perceived in silence. And in our time, bombarded as we are by words, it may be appropriate to keep silent about silence, in order to perceive it and become conscious of its power.

Silence says nothing that we can express through language. If silence had anything to say, then the words of silence would be a contradiction because silence would cease to be silence.

Silence says nothing. Silence is inexpressible through words, and yet we know that the inexpressible exists because the inexpressible is perceptible. Silence reveals itself.

### The Mystery of the Inexpressible

When I state the existence of the inexpressible, then the inexpressible becomes expressible. This is only to say that the inexpressible does exist, but it cannot be expressed, as we cannot penetrate its mystery. Words, if they are genuine, are rooted in the depth of life and open for us a revelation of the inexpressible. Genuine words are mediators between silence and sense.

A word that fails to bring about and create this mediation between silence and meaning is spurious and is therefore a word that condemns us. Such a useless word has no effect because it does not bear any witness to the realm of reality between silence and meaning that mediates silence and where Man finds his center.

Where this mediating word is missing, we do not find meaning. And vice versa: Where there is no meaning, there is also no real word. In false words the inexpressible is not present, but where it is present, it manifests itself as the most precious jewel of language and we become conscious of the inexpressible.

The inexpressible of which we are conscious is what language itself does not say but only hints at or perhaps hides. The inexpressible only resonates in the spoken word and is only perceived by the listener. But not every listener can hear it; only the attentive listener and the loving listener hear the silence of the word and perceive and understand something more in the word than just the content of the word. He also perceives the sound of the word.

If we do not perceive the sound of the word, then we hear only a part of the word. A word without sound, a word that only says what can be recorded by a machine, is not a word. The word is more than a sound wave and the word is more than meaning. In the sound of the word we find our way to the core of life, and we become aware that the inexpressible exists although it is inexpressible. According to Plotinus, the *logos* (the word) of the soul is a silent *logos*. The word of the Spirit is a silent word. To listen for what the word emanates is to participate in the word.

### Perceiving the Voice of Silence

We can perceive the inexpressible because our awareness is not limited to perception through our senses and understanding through reasoning. But awareness begins with perception through the senses. I see, I hear, I feel, I smell, I taste, and still I do not quite understand what I perceive there, although my reasoning power tries to understand it all. And although our faculty of reason understands much, the processes and capabilities of our senses are a mystery closed to reason and its understanding. I do not know why I see and hear, or taste flavors and smell odors. But I know that I perceive something and that I am aware of it. I can also experience that my perceptive faculty goes beyond these two fields of awareness, that there exists something beyond perception by the senses and understanding by reasoning that the ancients of East and West have called the "third eye" or the "third ear." It is somehow an awareness of what cannot be perceived and understood. It is the awareness of the inexpressible and of the unspoken that resonates and vibrates in unison with the word and its content. And we hear it if we are open to listening and to love, because without love there is no real awareness.

Attentive loving awareness can also be called "mysticism"—mysticism in the sense of direct awareness of reality.

Immediate awareness is the immediate experience of totality, the All in the concrete—in a loved one, in a flower, or in the sound of a bell. I will not become aware of reality through thoughts or concepts such as universe, God, or totality. The experience of life, the experience of all reality, opens up in the immediate encounter with the concrete. Furthermore, whoever does not see a whole forest in one tree will not see either forest or tree. Whoever does not see and experience the entire mystery of being a woman or being a man, of humanity or friendship, in a loved one, in one's children or friends, will never experience what it means to be human, to be a woman, a man, a child, or a friend. And whoever reduces human life to what one hears or understands lives a miserable human life. This person has no joy and does not experience the fullness of life.

Only if we are capable of perceiving and experiencing totality in the concrete will life begin to unfold for us. This experience shows us a connection between that which is said and that which is unsaid, between the inexpressible and the expressible, between the formed and the unformed. This link is neither dualistic (here the word and there silence), nor is it a monistic mixture of two things. This connection is *advaita*, a-dual. We have to distinguish, but we cannot separate.

### The Impotence of Silence

What is the power of silence? The power of silence is its impotence. Silence as silence has no power. Genuine silence is impotent. When we ask, and the answer is silence, then we are not allowed to interpret this silence as either yes or no. This

silence leaves us free to do or not do something. The decision becomes our responsibility, and we cannot put the burden on the silent person.

When Jesus was asked what the truth is, he remained silent and left it to us to find truth on the right or the left, above or below. He did not want to bind us or exercise any power over the listening questioner, because this silence has no power. To seek advantage from silence is not only insincere but also rebounds on the person who does it, because whoever speaks or remains silent and whoever listens, they are all one. Again we distinguish listener and speaker, but we cannot separate them.

Silence has no power; it does not threaten or impose, perhaps because it is open to everything and ready for everything.

### The Listening Word

The power of silence is not silence. Silence is the silent witness of trust. The power of silence lies in the listening word. Silence has transferred its power to the listening word, which has placed its trust in it.

The power of silence becomes obvious when the listening word transmits the silence and translates the silence into words. Every word that has this transmission has an enormous power. The entire power of silence is transmitted to the listening word.

Silence itself has trust in the word and empowers the word to reveal what is concealed in silence but does not exhaust it. The *logos*, the word, is the translation of silence into the word itself. And this word is sonorous, meaningful, and effective in itself.

### The Man Who Listens

The link between silence and word is the same one we find between impotence and potency. It is a-dual, *advaita*.

Silence gives power to the word and, at the same time, empowers Man, who not only listens to the word but also lets it resound in him, gives it resonance, and acts according to this word. Once again, as Jesus says, "What I hear from my father, I do."

This trust that rests in silence, this "do what you want"—what the silence says—is only in the present. It is present for us, for our responsibility, and it is up to us to give an answer with our life. The trust that rests in silence liberates us and enables us to respond.

The presence of silence—which says nothing, does not threaten, gives no orders or commandments, and has to be translated into the human sphere—is the energy of the mystery. And the power of mystery is human freedom and human dignity.

People are rarely conscious of this presence and do not experience this power, freedom, and dignity because they have allowed language to become so corrupt that it is only a means of exchanging information, in order to do or to know this or that. Our language no longer witnesses or creates because we have exiled words

from the realm of silence and because the listening word does not find resonance in our rigidity and narrowness. We no longer hear the sound of the living word.

### The Incarnation of the Word

Man can hear the word or not. We can hear the message of the living word or simply not hear it. We do not hear, not only because of our ill will, but because we are deaf; we do not hear because we do not pay attention, because we are distracted; we do not hear because we are listening to too many other noises at the same time.

Listening is an art, and this art is represented by a word that I scarcely dare to name because it has been used and wrongly abused. The word that stands for the art of listening is "obedience," from *ob-audire*. Obedience means not only to hear, attentively and precisely, the words of others, but to listen to the silence that is in their words, which becomes a revelation only for the loving listener.

I hear the word while receiving the word, and this receiving is incarnation.

This receiving is what has been preached in churches since their foundation: "And the word became flesh." This is not just the privilege of Jesus Christ but the destiny of every person and of every word.

In many baroque churches one sees in the paintings of the annunciation how Mary received the Holy Spirit through her ear—to teach us that we, too, can receive and be enriched by the word, since we all have ears.

To receive the word and let it become flesh in us and thereby to become like God, to become word—this is our task, and thus our answer should lie in letting ourselves be conceived. But, to stay with the metaphor, failures and even miscarriages can occur. This happens, of course, if the word is not accepted or if it disturbs or frightens us because it makes us do something that perhaps we do not dare or want to do because our life is imprisoned by the many noises of banal existence.

A misuse of freedom can occur, such as when freedom is taken as a pretext for satisfying whims. Then there is no longer obedience, listening to the message of things and of others, which must pass through the filter of my ears and my consciousness. The message does not get through because the filters are blocked, and the messages of life are stopped, shut out, and ultimately lost.

The virginity of receiving stands here as a symbol of willingness, emptiness, and attention—a symbol of nonattachment so that we can become aware, in the right manner, of the birds, the trees, the sun, and the cries of the little ones; of the word of lovers; and of teachings. We must let all these things into us through our filters, allow them to become flesh and to work in us until they are reborn and transformed.

These messages that come from immediate perception give us freedom and power. Without the freedom based on silent trust, there would not be any power. Power, in the sense in which I use the word, means the ability to use and not misuse energy. We must also emphasize that our words are often atrophied by overuse. Man can hear the word or not hear it. Contemporary civilization is characterized by an attitude that makes us want to do something, create something, undertake some-

thing, and keep busy rather than first listening to the silence in us and in others, so as to accept everything and let it become flesh in us, and then give birth to what we have conceived.

### The Word as Sacrament

Using Christian language I could say, the sacrament is the spoken word of the listening person. I am not speaking just about the sacraments of the church, where this power of the word is present. Let us consider marriage, which is a sacrament not only in Christianity but in all cultures and religions. By saying yes or no, with one word we determine what has been said, and change reality. A word, an idle word—which does not create, which has no energy, which does not transform and does not become action—is no word because it is a useless word, with no power (*a-ergon*). If this transforming power is not contained in our words and if they do not open life and beget life, then we will have to account for this.

What we have to learn is to listen, to receive, and to allow incarnation, so as to generate word and action. Otherwise everything we say is only superficial and useless chatter—words that are not born of incarnation, words that are not born in us. So the listener will sense that whoever is speaking, or admonishing, does not live what he says and does not embody the word: It does not become flesh. Our life is our answer, and therefore every word of ours should be a sacrament. This sacrament is the spoken word of a noble person, as Meister Eckhart would say, of a listening, attentive person, of a loving person. And only the sacramental word in the above sense is genuine and true and has transforming and life-creating power.

### The Power of Silence

Here we complete the circle. The person who listens with love and attention—the person in whom this incarnation happens—knows the guiding power of silence. It is the power that guides things without commanding: the power that does not disturb the harmony but rather enhances it because the listener, living in accord with it, desires what must be done; because the listener is not afraid of being misled or that his path may take another direction, different from the one he had planned and intended; because the listener trusts.

But in order to listen, in order to take part in the power of silence, we have to become word. We have first to learn to be silent, and to do that we must be empty. We should not have too many noises inside; we have to confront everything with such attention and devotion as if the past were gone and the future entirely unreal, so that we can concentrate and be listeners in our entire demeanor, in everything we do, and hear what is to be heard.

This willingness, this fearlessness, this listening attitude and obedience to the invisible and the inaudible melodies of heaven—what the Greeks called the music

of the spheres—corresponds in Christian parlance to listening to the Father, which we experience in the Spirit by taking the reality of Christ as word: this is human wisdom, and this is the power of silence. It is the power that has its roots in silence and reveals itself in the word that emerges from it.

We have to pay attention to this incarnation that happens in us. And if we are attentive and aware, then the word of the listening person not only has power; it has something else for which we are not usually prepared because we have let the truth freeze outside and have not prepared a dwelling place for it. The words of the listening person contain truth when the truth is neither my subjective conviction nor an objective correspondence. The truth is realization. The true word realizes what it says because it translates the reality into effect.

The genuine word is the bearer of truth, and so truth is not outside us. It is what I say, provided that what I am saying is a real word. The real word is the cause and determines what it says. This is the sacrament. The listening person, the attentive person, and as I said at the beginning, the loving person know the power of the word because they also hear the impotence of silence.

### The Word (of Silence) as Praxis

If we consider the current situation of crisis—interpersonal, political, economic, religious—and we want to transform it, we need to adopt a feminine attitude: In accepting this situation realistically we transform it and give birth to a new style of life.

In the immediate awareness in which this conception occurs, we conceive, in the Christian sense of the word, the words of the *logos*, of the word—when *logos* is transformed into word. We receive that vibration, that message, that light, or that dimension of reality that will nourish us and make our lives fruitful. We receive a latent dimension of reality that is not yet realized. In this conception germinate creative power and human creativity.

The artist is someone who conceives what does not yet exist. But an artist is not an extraordinary person. We all are artists, poets, and creative people, or at least we are creators of our own life. Yet first we have to become what we potentially are. We have to become true knowers and capable of action, so that we can let what does not yet exist come into being. In the process of becoming what we are we become creators of our reality because we enter into a creative dialogue with life. In doing this we recognize that every life is a creation. Every life is something that did not exist before. Reality is always in the process of becoming.

In dialogue we experience this transforming and creative power through which we can form our life creatively. We know at the same time that in us is this power of silence that we greatly need in the present situation of upheaval in order to achieve a radical new orientation out of which we can creatively transform the existing crisis. And we know almost with certainty that if we shut ourselves off from the transforming power of silence, the world is headed toward a catastrophe.



Our world, the world as we have erected it with our systems, is an unnatural world, and it is not only in upheaval, it is on the verge of collapse because it is no longer liveable, but against life.

The necessary transformation does not happen by making a few reforms here or there; rather, the new orientation has to go deeper in the aforementioned sense. If it is to be radical, it must reach to the very root of life.

For this reason, we have to concentrate while tuning in to the sound of life and vibrating with the sound of what is inexpressible, each in one's own way, because in touching the sound of what is inexpressible, the receiving we speak of happens automatically and the receiver is fertile in one's life.

Each one's words and deeds will be seeds that spring from new life and generate new life. Into one's life moves this inner peace out of which all life emanates, a peace in which I can accept myself although I know my imperfections, weaknesses, and faults. This state in which I am at peace with myself is the first and only possible step toward bringing peace around me—a harmony that gushes forth and envelops all creatures, thereby transforming our whole being.

This generation and becoming only happen in a loving person because one conceives through love and surrender. But often we are too selfish, too egocentric for this receiving to happen. Often we are not ready to surrender and love because we are afraid of what keeps us prisoner in our present entanglement. It is the fear of what is new and has not yet taken shape. It is the fear of our freedom, of our life that is not yet realized, and so we shun the responsibility to shape our life creatively. We forget that every life, including our own, is unique and cannot reoccur. No life can be exchanged or neglected. No one can realize what has not yet been realized in our life. No one can give an answer to our life for us.

To put it differently, our answer is the new creation that germinates in this realization. Its realization rests within us, the creatures. It is not only our task but also our dignity, because in this creative activity God is involved. In God's creation we are the shapers, builders, and artists of our life and of the life that is connected to us. Life is total freedom. We only have to be what is present in the symbol of the immaculate conception: unconditional and immediate receivers, those who hear the importence of silence, those who experience the power of the word, the bearers of a new, divine life.



## THREE EXAMPLES OF HOLINESS

### *Clare, John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila*

#### Contemplating in the World's Naves

Where else can we contemplate, if contemplation is not to be an escape from reality—a consolation for those who, unable to do otherwise, withdraw from life trying to do at least something they believe to be important?

Etymologically speaking, a nave is related to a ship. We are in transit, which is what makes our task so important. Today machines, computers, and electrical appliances certainly make our lives more comfortable—but is this more life? I have my doubts.

We may have lost the true meaning of life. We have filled our lives with many things, and we believe that living is thinking, suffering, enjoying, and doing good. All of these are incidental and often accidental in our lives. "I have come," writes John (10:10), "so that they may have life, and have it to the full." Some modern translations say "eternal life," and few people really know the meaning of the phrase "life to the full": Life. Contemplation allows us to discover the full meaning of life, which is simply life itself. And life is not thinking or acting, life is not loving, suffering, praising, or listening; these are all "activities" in our life, but life is prior to all these activities, and so it is through living life that you think, suffer, walk, talk, and do many other things. We tend to lose the meaning of "bare" life (this, in my opinion, is the hermeneutical key to a modern understanding of the passion for poverty of Francis of Assisi and Clare), the complete nakedness of life when it has nothing and is faced with the risk of simply being. As Thomas Aquinas would say, *Vita viventibus est esse*—life for the living is being.

With so much knowledge and so many machines at our disposal, we have forgotten what perhaps is the most important thing of all, the *art of living*; we have yet to learn how to live. Without life we cannot live, and it is life, this divine primeval value, that we have neglected. And so we end up angry or satisfied for all the things we can or cannot do. But it appears that the bare experience of life is beyond our grasp. We are so busy with all the "nice things" we do that we seem to allow deeper, more fundamental, but also more basic realities, such as breathing, to escape us. Contemplation allows us to discover the fullness of life.

In a letter to Agnes of Prague, Clare reproduces the Trinitarian pattern that has been followed in one way or another from Plato to the *Upaniṣads*, from Hugh of St.

Victor to Thomas Merton, from the Buddhist monks of ancient through modern times. She speaks of three moments, or processes, through which we reach true life: *intuere, considera, contempla, o nobilissima regina*. In Clare, I assume, was the echo of that extraordinary hymn of the Latin liturgy of the Transfiguration that urges us not to turn our eyes to the heavens but to look around us. All you who seek Christ—this is Clare's *leitmotif*—look up: there are no naves but stars and much more. All you who seek Christ, open your eyes and look around you.

The pattern is the same. From Plato onward we can identify three main steps that, in our attempt to speed up everything, we have perhaps forgotten. First: Look, listen, feel, aim, *intuere*. Without regard to the life of the senses, without a close relationship with the material world, without overcoming the alienation that starts with our body and continues through the body of the other, through to the rest of the material world, you cannot live a fully human life. Enjoy complete sensuality so as to be able to rediscover this dimension that is so often distorted, unappreciated, and lost in oblivion or in the adoration of the extremes of the material world, of the senses, and of beauty. Whoever has not fallen in love with nature, whoever is not sensitive to the beauty that belongs to the senses, will be unable to experience pleasure, and everything will become a kind of abstraction or empty words. Aim, look, fall in love with beautiful things, with flowers, with everything; *mina, guarda, intuere, o nobilissima regina*—look around you and fear nothing. Without intuition, without a regard for the senses, without identifying ourselves with the material world, starting from our very own body: I do not have a body, I *am* body. I am many other things, but I am—we are—matter, earth. The trouble started when we began to treat the earth as an object.

Consider beauty and sensitivity. Let us think of the wonderful passage where Christ speaks in defense of Mary Magdala. She had carried out an act of exquisite beauty, femininity, and sexuality: the perfume, the hair, the feet, and the kisses. And Jesus Christ defends her: "Leave her alone, she has done a good work." We can debate issues like justice, poverty, or perfumes, but there is no debate about beauty: "Leave her alone, she has done a good work."

*Intuere*, look, and Clare adds, consider. Think. The role of the mind, the responsibility of the intellect is huge: knowing sensual, material, and temporal reality is not sufficient—we need to know the other side of reality, the one that is not captured with the senses but with the mind and intellect. Do not consider science or knowledge as a luxury or as an obstacle to the true life. It is indispensable to open the second eye, the eye of the mind, the eye of the intellect. What is invisible to the first eye, *sensibility*, will be visible to the second, to the *considera*. "Consider" is one of the most ambitious words known. The word actually refers to the extraordinary act of bringing the stars together; what the hands cannot do is done by the mind, bringing all the stars together in the harmonious unity of a divine universe. To consider is to put the stars in their right place, in harmony. Whoever considers silently enters true reality and, through consideration, that is, by meditating, enters into harmony with it, becomes part of it, and contributes to its dynamism.

The responsibility of the intellect: Just as we cannot do without the body, we cannot renounce the mind or intellect. Consider, meditate, think. It is the second eye that lets us discover the dark side of the moon—invisible, but we know it is there. And it lets us discover the equally invisible side of eternity, which is simply the other face of temporality. Eternity does not come later—that would be too naïve—or, as Symeon the new theologian said, “Whoever has not experienced eternal life here should not aspire to it, because it does not exist afterward.” Those who are unable to discover eternal life in temporality will not be able to find it afterward—it is a totally different thing. Without the second eye of meditation, without some form of meditation, we cannot lead a human life. We are just machines: we are continuously bombarded and our actions are just reactions. We cannot be truly free if we cannot think by ourselves, and we cannot think if we do not give thinking the space it needs, through meditation, to digest.

Aim, consider, contemplate. Only when the first and second eyes are open does the third eye open, as the Buddhists and Hugh of St. Victor say: the third eye is the eye of *contemplation*. Without the first two, our sight is off target, but without the third we do not see clearly, we do not capture the third dimension. If we only have the two eyes of the mind and of the senses, we are lacking the third dimension, which gives the exact perspective. Reality and life are three-dimensional. Without the third eye we cannot see the true reality of things. Then we may fall victim to an aberrant sensuality or an inhuman intellectualism. So contemplation is not a luxury for some; it is absolutely necessary in order to bear the burden of life, to see things and to be able to “capture” reality. Thought by itself will destroy its object; mere sensory contact with reality will suffocate it, although by the same token, rarefied contemplation that is removed from the world is simply not human.

What then does the third eye see? Contemplation is what makes us really alive. It does not require much effort, and it does not have a fixed object. All that is needed is just an appropriate preparation: we must go through the stages of *intuere* and *considera* first. Contemplation is effortless inasmuch as its driving force is life itself—or, we may say, love. When we contemplate we are not looking for a reward. Life is not a race where some make it to the finish and others do not; it is not a form of spiritual consumerism or ascetic competitiveness, which so often lead to a distortion of intellectual and spiritual life. Contemplation is what makes us come into direct contact with reality as a whole; we experience a form of ecstasy where the fatal separation between subject and object no longer exists. Love your neighbor as yourself, not as if you have to do to them as you would like to be done to you. If you do not discover yourself in others, you have not reached contemplation and you are still living in the dichotomy between “one” and “other.” In this way you can only consider the rights and needs of others for pragmatic, practical, or political reasons, however useful they may be. The contemplative person has no fear of losing anything, nor is he tempted to do good deeds as if he had to justify his existence through them. It is an inner fire, eternal life, infinite life. We must see the invisible—as St. Paul said, “comprehend the incomprehensible.” The third eye

only opens together with the other two, and in this way we go beyond the world of things and ideas, and we do not turn God into the great ghost depicted in most of Western philosophy and theology.

Contemplation leads us to being, and *Being*, both in the Eastern and Western traditions, is another name for God. And God, going back to the example of St. Clare, has revealed or manifested himself through Christ. Contemplation makes you be, or as she says, leads you to divinization. It places your eyes, your soul, and your heart in God, and through contemplation you will transform yourself completely. Clare is transformed into an image of the divinity of Jesus Christ. We all know that an image reflects and reveals the object. Contemplation leads to being. Being is a word; Being is God and therefore leads to what Being is—*actus purus*, as the scholastics would say.

Contemplation is eminently active, ready to spring into action, but the action is not the result of a thought process or of something that attracts our attention but rather of a fullness that comes from within and is the fruit of love. Therefore, contemplation cannot be considered the synthesis of theory and practice; it is the prior experience to the theory-practice dichotomy. Contemplation is not looking at the conceptual world, and it is not looking through the inner eye; it is much more than that. It is transformation. "Transform yourself," says Clare, "deify yourself." But transform yourself into what? Into what you can, into what you really, fundamentally, are: *Being*. And Being is action, and action is activity, and activity is the act of each of us just where we are. Here the cycle becomes a life cycle. Contemplation is not contrary to practice; it is not in opposition to theory-practice. Theory—thought—leads to the clarification of ideas; practice leads to actions; contemplation leads to the realization in me and through me of what must be done, because Being is action. So contemplation leads to the transformation of everything around us.

Contemplation does not mean withdrawing into another life, but it is a process of transformation that transforms reality as a whole. It is our transformation in Christ—not only the crucified Christ but the Christ of resurrection and of the Eucharist: the complete Christ. Resurrection is not limited to Christ alone; it is the vocation of all of us. If we are unable to manifest our resurrection, there will be no contemplation and no transformation; we are still unborn. Resurrection is ours, it is now, and it is precisely that joy that results from contemplation. It makes us sufficiently humble, so that wherever we are, we can leap forward and do what transforms both us and reality.

We need to be aware that the world we live in is in need of reform, but reform is not enough. *Revolution* and deformation (that is, violence), destroying for the sake of destruction, and thinking that something new will come of it is naïve, immoral, and does not actually work. *Transformation*, metamorphosis, cannot be the result of the conviction that everything must be planned but should flow out of our depths; thus we become the *synergoi* of this extraordinary adventure, which is an adventure of all reality. Only a contemplative person has the strength to undertake this radical, political, economic, and social change that today's world needs after six thousand years of history made of patriarchalism, wars, exploitation, and religions that supported

the status quo. I think the time has come for us to start a new process, peacefully sharing Paul's vision, "In Christ a new creature, in Christ a new creation, in Christ, a constant novelty in all things." But only a contemplative person can achieve this—a contemplative person, however, who has gone through both phases of sensuality and intellect. We are not talking here of shamanism, where things are transformed by magic; this is quite a different thing.

The action that results from contemplation is not premeditated. Contemplation is absolute sincerity, so we realize that every word is a sacrament: "Everything that the Father says, I say." Transformation must be radical: It starts with us and extends to all reality. Therefore, contemplation is not just man's calling; it is the only hope for our social, ecological, and human reality. Contemplating in the world's naves means precisely two things: being able to support the pillars, the columns of our world, and if necessary, like Samson, not hesitating to bring them down.

The measure of contemplation is love. Every time the Risen One appeared to his disciples he said two things. The first was *peace*—a word that means silence, not expecting success, being joyful and content with oneself and others, emanating a harmony that can only be communicated if we have it within us. Then he said *do not be afraid*—afraid for tomorrow, afraid for what might happen to my child, afraid for a world that is falling apart, afraid for my job . . . afraid. If you are afraid of anything at all, there is no contemplation. Fear does not come from thought or from our will. If we are afraid of hell, failure, or many things, we shall not have peace. Contemplation is the great human transformation. The Pharisees, the prostitutes, the rich, and the poor are all called to contemplation: there is no discrimination. In order to reach this third stage, everyone must build up all his sensitivity and intelligence and then simply let go. Once again St. Clare acts as a model for us showing how to accept things, how to achieve transformation by transforming ourselves and that part of reality that has been entrusted to us. In this sense, contemplating in the world's naves is our joy and our duty.

### Some Aspects of the Spirituality of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila

#### *What Is Holiness?*

In these anthropocentric (humanistic) times it is common to hear too much of an anthropomorphic concept of holiness, considered as the summit of human perfection. In this humanistic climate a person is said to be a saint when he is perfect. That is not altogether wrong, but it does depend on the meaning we give to the concept of "human perfection." Beauty, for example, is undoubtedly a human perfection, but does it strictly belong to holiness? Perfection means fullness, completeness—and a being is perfect when it does not lack anything that belongs to it. Now, if the being is a composite being, then it is further required that all its parts are blended in a harmonic unity. But what is the *human* being, so that we may know its perfection?

When does a person reach his fullness? Is there or can there be real holiness here on earth?

Following these *ascending* philosophical considerations we should come to the conclusion that only God is perfect and that, consequently, holiness is his exclusive attribute, insofar as we can speak of attributes of Divinity. We may, furthermore, develop at this point some *descending* theological reflections that will be of some importance for our subject.

Only God is holy. Strictly speaking, only God is good and beautiful and true; actually, only he *is*, only he is *Being*. Nevertheless, there is a participation, an analogy, a communication of all this in his creatures. Our being human, for example, just "is" and, in consequence, is only good and beautiful and true insofar as it participates and receives all this from God. But something about holiness is peculiar. Every being, by the very fact that it "is," is good and beautiful and true, but not holy. It may be sacred—each existence being a participation in God—but it is not thereby holy.

So, what is holiness? It is God himself, it is his very Life, his existence, the structure of his Being, if we may put it like that. God offers and communicates to his creatures not only Being but also all the constitutive attributes of Being. But he does not communicate holiness, because it cannot properly be created or given along with being, since it is the very essence of God.

Yet there are saints on earth, because God can still do one thing, namely, communicate and give himself. He can descend and dwell in the person of the saint. He can simply take possession of his creatures in a personal and intimate way. Here lies the role of Christ as an ontic Mediator between God and World.

Holiness, on the one hand, is thus an absolute perfection—God—and on the other hand it is the Life of this God in some of his creatures. It is not, therefore, primarily a moral concept, but an ontological reality: the divine reality communicating his intimate and particular Life to some of his children. The saint is thus not primarily the *humanly* perfect person but the divinized human person. Of course, that divinization implies a very peculiar transformation of the saint and an ontological (and in consequence also moral) purity, but it does not require a perfect person from a *humanistic* point of view.

The saint (*sanctus*) is therefore the person God has taken specially for himself, the one he has "reserved" and "set apart." God calls everyone to be divinely perfect—that is, holy. Each person receives his personal vocation to holiness. But only the saint answers fully to that divine call and freely accepts, wills, and loves to be this living Temple of God. So each saint is a kind of revelation of God and has a message to deliver, though not always with words. He is an instrument of the Divine; he is the person in whom God, who is Love, finds not only his resting but also his acting place. True holiness is not so much the realization of God by humans as the realization of humans by God. The saint embodies the complete human personality despite our rational concepts about human perfection, or indeed the *objective* shortcomings



in his pilgrimage toward God. We must not forget that holiness, only attainable here on earth, is a limiting concept inasmuch as the eternal life of divine Union has already shattered all human limitations.

### John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila

Some saints reflect the perfections of God by their hidden and silent lives. Some are heroes of sacrifice, and others victims of love. Some have a rather weak human nature and some a strong personality. Holiness is as manifold as Man and his nature.

There is, however, not a little difficulty in classifying our two saints, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. If we classify them as contemplative because they reached the highest degree of fruition of God and union with him, we may forget that both led extremely active lives not only as spiritual teachers, but also as reformers within their orders.

#### *The Example of Their Lives*

It is something close to presumptuous folly to attempt a summary of the spiritual climate, political issues, and cultural crisis of that turning point in European history that took place in Spain during the sixteenth century. The destiny of the world, not<sup>1</sup> just politically or culturally (under a superficial definition), but in an ontologically real and spiritual sense could be said to have rested not exactly in the hands, but in the lives of a relatively small number of people living in one very particular corner of Europe. What was taking place at that time was not only the birth of "modern" Europe, or the end of the "medieval" period, but also the great conflict and one of the few most decisive encounters among cultures, worlds, religions. The seeds were sown, and the problems of a world culture started being considered in a very conscious and serious way.

That crisis involved the purification and reform of religion, both from inside and from outside—new ideas about the relation between Man, God and the universe, the relation of Christianity and Christian culture with other religions and cultures—not just from a speculative but from a vital, existential point of view. Everything was in ferment, and Spain was the geographical locus of this historical moment, although, of course, not all the facts and ideas were Spanish.

During this time, Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada (1515–1582) and Juan de Yepes (1542–1591) were born, both in Castile, central Spain.

Teresa was twenty-one when she entered religious life and became a Carmelite nun in Avila, her native town. The aim of the Carmelite Order is to enable its

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the masterly chapter by F. Heer, *Europäische Geistesgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1953), 280–331.

members to lead a life of contemplation through extensive periods of prayer (in its deepest sense), detachment, and penance, naturally centered on loving and not merely speculative contemplation. Two years after she entered the Convent of the Incarnation (1538), she wrote, "The Lord began to bestow many graces on me and elevated me to the prayer of quiet, and sometimes the prayer of union."<sup>2</sup> Considering her level of awareness of her inner life, we may rely on her terminology and affirm that she began a life of habitual and steady contemplation only twelve years afterward. She followed this deep life of the spirit for thirty-three years. She was of an extreme sensitivity and an intense awareness of spiritual things. This second period may be divided into two different stages: one of simple prayer of quiet, transcending all conceptual understanding and with partial consciousness of her union with God (twelve years), and the other of constant union with God in a life of identification of the will (eleven years), and of spiritual marriage (ten years).

It was in her fortieth year, having achieved constant union with God, that she realized her apostolic mission was to raise the spiritual mood and observance of her Order, and rather than just enjoying her own spiritual perfection, she started the huge adventure of reforming the Carmel with no other means than her great love and confidence in God. She had to overcome all sorts of difficulties and misunderstandings from all sides. In spite of her poor health, and without losing the intensity of her contemplative life and constant union with God, she undertook the most astonishing active life as foundress of convents of discalced Carmelites all over Spain.

Perhaps one of her most striking features was her completeness, her wholeness. Her holiness brought her to the closest union with God that a person can have in this world, and this union really divinized her Being. All the same she retained a fully human personality, sensitive to the small things of the world, and with an exquisite sense of humor. Her union with God did not separate her from her peers, and she remained throughout a woman with all the complexity of a feminine soul. The secret of her positive attitude toward life and nature was her Christocentric spirituality. Her awareness of God and of her own resemblance to God came from her experience of God *in* and *through* Christ, not excluding his humanity. An essential feature of Carmelite spirituality is to consider Christ as the bridegroom of the soul and to find in that living union (spiritual marriage) the most perfect transformation in God.

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John of the Cross entered the order of the "calced" Carmelite friars at twenty-one, and he was twenty-five when he met Teresa, who was then fifty-three. Instead of passing over to the Carthusian Order to live a more austere life of penance and contemplation as he had first intended, he joined Teresa in the noble work of reforming the Carmel among men, as Teresa had already begun among the women. In order to complete this project, he had to endure calumnies and persecutions of

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<sup>2</sup> *Life*, IV.59.

the most cruel sort. Unlike Teresa he never became the official founder, but he was the inspiring soul of Carmel. He was a learned theologian (a student of Alcalá and Salamanca) and became one of the greatest mystics of all time. He wrote several books, all published after his death, and he is also one of the finest poets in all of Spanish literature.

### *Mystical Doctrine*

Only a mystic can teach a mystical doctrine, and this teaching is a vital communication. If mystics write anything, it is only as a surrogate and a reminder. If we were to try and summarize all they have written—lengthy yet also as succinct as it can be, for they do not use superfluous words—we should surely misrepresent their doctrine and only render a vague idea of it. How can we even imagine giving an outline of their message and describing their attempts to express the ineffable? All we can actually do is make an effort to examine the philosophical implications of their doctrine by illustrating its metaphysical structure.

The aim and end of human life is union with God; it is the transformation of our Being and its divinization. But the creature in itself is a nothingness, or, as our saints repeat constantly, a *nonada*, a not-nothingness. It exists because somehow it subsists outside nothingness, *extra nihilum*, suspended over the abyss of pure nothingness by the creative power of God. Thus, the creature, in order to reach God and be united with him, must abandon and forsake its own way of being, that is, its “not-yet-being,” its negativity, and negate its own not-nothingness.<sup>3</sup> Being cannot be destroyed. All we eliminate is the intrinsic negative element of our temporal existence.<sup>4</sup> In other words, this union with God is not mere knowledge but an ontological incorporation, although our intellect is also a part of our Being. It is not simply by “knowing” God that we shall be transformed into him, but by being fully united with him (and our Being is something more than intellect). By being one with him we reach our ultimate destiny.<sup>5</sup>

Now, strictly speaking, between the “creature” as such and God as such, there is nothing in common. If the former has to be united with God—that is, divinized—it has to be stripped of its way of being. Not only can I not reach God, but my Being cannot be united with him as long as it remains “creature”—not because “nature” is bad, but because it does not belong to the order of Divinity. But in myself I have nothing of this order; my nature does not possess anything homogeneous with God that could be utilized in my union with him.

This leads us to the famous path of absolute nothingness of our two mystics. I cannot trust my senses or my feelings, or my intellect with *its* intuitions, or my will, or even my very Being. I cannot rely on any created thing. If I see God, if I feel him,

<sup>3</sup> *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II.5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, I.5; *Dark Night of the Soul*, II.6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, I.4.5.

even if I love him, since my love is *what* I see, feel, love, or experience, it is not him, for he is beyond all *my* modes of apprehension and possession.

I can be transformed and united with him, I can be God, only if I leave absolutely everything that I feel, love, think, and experience<sup>6</sup> and even what I "imagine" to be, and it is he who takes possession of me and takes me and "remakes" me. Only thus is our real personality realized. This is the action of Grace within me. Here the importance of the creature is replaced by the absolute power of God. The naked path of pure faith is neither a blind belief nor a desperate effort to save myself, but it is the divine, free gift bestowed on me that calls me and transforms me. I no longer put my trust in myself, but in God alone.<sup>7</sup>

"God has only spoken one Word, which is His Son, and He has spoken It in eternal silence," says St. John of the Cross, repeating a statement commonly made by the Fathers of the Church. In order to be incorporated in him, we must enter into that silence, not only reducing to stillness all voices, images, and thoughts about everything, and even about God himself, but reducing our very being to an ontological silence. "In order to have the All you must leave the all," including ourselves.

The real path to God taught by these two great contemplatives is not that of mere contemplation of God as an object; it is not the purified and highly contemplative gaze on or experience of God; our gaze has to transcend all our powers and faculties and even our own Being. "Such is the likeness between faith and God that there is no other difference save that which exists between seeing God and believing in Him."<sup>8</sup> In Christian terms, it is the naked and supernatural path of true faith as a participation in the knowledge and Light of God himself, as an introduction to the divine Life in us, which is sustained, as it were, in us through his gifts of faith, hope, and charity.<sup>9</sup> Or again, St. John: "This dark night is the flowing of God into the soul."<sup>10</sup>

In order to arrive at that which thou knowest not  
Thou must go by a way that thou knowest not.  
In order to arrive at that which thou possessest not  
Thou must go by a way that thou possessest not.  
In order to arrive at that which thou art not  
Thou must go through that which thou art not.

Thus sings St. John of the Cross in a famous verse.<sup>11</sup> The progress of the spiritual Man toward God is rather the progress of God in Man. The ascent to the mountain on Man's part corresponds to the more real descent of God into his Being.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., I.2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., II.8:1.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., II.9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., II.6.

<sup>10</sup> *Dark Night of the Soul*, II.5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, I.13.

Once, St. Teresa was heatedly complaining to God in prayer about her sufferings and trials. She heard God telling her, "Teresa, thus do I treat my friends!" making her understand the purifying nature of suffering. But Teresa, who knew it already, answered boldly, "That is why you have so few friends!" Some have pointed out the difficulty and the impossibility of following the doctrine of our two Carmelite saints, erroneously taken as an inhuman form of self-denial. If we think in terms of human courage, it is true that the thorough spoliation of oneself required by them for the purpose of reaching the One is beyond human strength, and so if such spoliation were undertaken in selfish spiritual greed, it would be not only impossible but also unnatural. No human strength can achieve such a thing and walk the path of absolute denial, for the simple reason that if there is no God sustaining us from below, nothing remains under our feet. Moreover, St. John of the Cross repeatedly asserts that the two nights of the soul come only when a person has overcome the light of reason and has transcended the pathways of the senses.<sup>12</sup> But it is also true that no one by mere human force can climb to the top of the mountain where God dwells. It is God and God alone who calls and gives the gifts and graces necessary for such an ascent.<sup>13</sup> It is God's work in us and also through us. "It would not be a true and total transformation if the soul were not transformed into the three persons of the Holy Trinity. . . . The soul united and transformed by God breathes in God toward God the same divine breath that God breathes in himself toward the soul when it is transformed in Him."<sup>14</sup>

### *The Holiness of the Two Carmelite Saints*

Manifold and wonderful is God in his saints. Some sparks of his perfection shine forth in these chosen ones. Simplicity, love, obedience, spiritual power, personality, and many, many other values are reflected in the lives of the saints. What are the special characteristics of these two mystics?

I would venture to say that their characteristic feature, which is at the same time an urgent and important message for our times, is simply that of holiness itself. This is also true of the other great Carmelite saint, Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower.

Obviously, by the very fact of being saints, these people reflect the holiness of God, but the color of the divine light may be the red of love, the green of hope, the purple of penance, the infrared of genuine surrender, or the ultraviolet of mysticism, and so on.

Despite the rich spiritualities and the high mystical gifts with which they were endowed, they do not exclusively push or preach contemplation, mysticism, and the like; they do not want anyone to deny the world, nor do they make self-denial their central doctrine. They simply preach and live a holy life—that is to say, holiness,

<sup>12</sup> *Spiritual Canticle*, 34.

<sup>13</sup> *Living Flame of Love*, III.3.

<sup>14</sup> *Spiritual Canticle*, 39.

pure and simple. The rest is ultimately irrelevant—just a means for the “one thing necessary.” Their writings were either written under obedience, as in the case of St. Teresa, or mainly intended to help special souls reach union with God, as with St. John. Yet their books are truly universal, and the examples of their lives, notwithstanding the primary goal of their activities, are a lesson for every religious soul.

What ultimately matters is not our ideas or experiences, or our denying this or doing that; what matters is not a certain method of prayer or a particular way of life. The truly important thing, the only and ultimate end of Man, is holiness, union with God, transformation into God, the divinization of our whole Being.<sup>15</sup>

For the whole of the sixteenth century (not to mention our own time), Europe was going through a world crisis in every respect. Everywhere, problems and solutions were planned and enforced across the board. The answer of the Carmelite nun or friar is unequivocal: Holiness. But this is not holiness in the guise of selfish self-reform, not an individualistic holiness in order to rearrange the world and solve its problems—or to save themselves, as a means for something else, or as a condition—but a true holiness as an end in itself, because the ontological weight of a divinized person is greater than anything else, because the meaning of life on earth—this “bad night in a bad inn” (St. Teresa)—is not to organize heaven on earth, but to bring earth into heaven. “A single supernatural act of Love has more value than a thousand material universes” (St. John of the Cross). Consequently, the only true approach to Life is to let it freely flow. In keeping with its profound nature, life on earth will be truly human, happy, and beautiful. “Is it not remarkable that a poor sister of St. Joseph’s Convent can reign over all the earth and the elements?”<sup>16</sup> It is hard to imagine anything further from denial of the world, because it sees all creation as an explosion of divine Love. Only then will Man be the king of creation and transform everything into the true everlasting Kingdom, which is much more than a mere temporal world.

Only then will Man be able to sing and rejoice, and realize that “the heavens are mine, the earth is mine, the peoples are mine! Mine are the just and the sinners! Mine are the angels and the Mother of God is mine! All things are mine! God Himself is mine and for me, because Christ is mine and all for me!”<sup>17</sup> The reason is clear: I am no longer mine, but it is God that is in me and I in him. That is the Christian mystery of Christ!

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<sup>15</sup> *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, III.16.1.

<sup>16</sup> *Life*, VI.104.

<sup>17</sup> *Spiritual Maxims*, 25.

### **SECTION III**

#### **THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE**





# Part One

## THE EXPERIENCE OF LIFE

### *Mysticism*

*To the mystic hiding within every human.*

*Rerum itaque notitiam, ni fallor, modo triplici apprehendimus.  
Nam alia experiendo probamus, alia ratiocinando colligimus,  
aliorum certitudinem credendo tenemus.*

—Richard of St. Victor, *De Trinitate* (891A)<sup>1</sup>

*Wan leben gibet daz edelste bekennen.*

—Meister Eckhart, *Sermon* 86<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Unless I am mistaken, we arrive at our knowledge of things in three ways. For some things we discover by experience, others we put together by the use of reason, and others we hold as certain by faith."

<sup>2</sup> "Life bestows the noblest of knowledge." The complete sentence from the sermon, which defends the superiority of Martha over Mary (Lk 10:38–40), reads, "Martha knew Mary better than Mary knew Martha, since she had (already) led a good and long life; for life bestows the noblest of knowledge."



## PROLOGUE

Ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν  
καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων.

In him [the Word] was Life  
and Life was the light of men.

—Jn 1:4<sup>1</sup>

After I wrote this book, its now far-off gestation spanning decades and the final draft the best part of three years, I had to resist three temptations.

The first was to suspend the work to let it take root in my life and avoid the distraction of writing it up.

The second was to take up the work again and write it much better by making use of the insights that had crystallized during its gestation.

The third was finally to write up my book on mysticism and not on the meaning of experience.

I have managed to resist all three: the first because the roots had already taken, the second for lack of time, and the third because “my book” is that of my life and not of my written work.

In the end, though, I do not find these excuses convincing. My temptations were justifiable, but now I am not able to begin the book anew. It may not be a major work, but at least I am actually living this life. Going over the book again has helped me live it all through once more, although I must admit to a strong temptation to destroy the manuscript.

The Western mentality of classification will want to know how to catalog this book. It does not seem “modern,” yet it cannot be placed in the (diverse and jumbled) ranks of “postmodernist” works. On the one hand I have tried not to break with tradition. On the other hand, tradition is transgressed in one leap—of a qualitative or quantitative nature, depending where one is on the dividing line. It may be that by its very nature mysticism resists any form of pigeonholing and classification. The label that may somehow fit my work better is that of an intercultural approach to

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<sup>1</sup> Some manuscripts use the present tense rather than the imperfect: “In him is Life and Life is the light of men.”

a human problem, although, clearly, the approach to the question can only reflect the author's own preconceptions.

This study has one defect, among many others, albeit an accepted and intentional one: It assumes no position on the academic horizon of the contemporary debate on mysticism, and neither does it refer to the postmodernist movements that have emerged around mysticism. I have always attempted, within the limits of the possible, to keep abreast of current developments I consider important: I have resisted, however, the temptation to enter the fray, with the disadvantage that many a reader may feel the lack of explicit references (although implicit connections abound) to the "current" context. This lack is the result of a choice as well as of pragmatism. There cannot be a "no man's land" in the land of Man, but the *Sitz im Leben* of the present study is not the Western land—even though I am far from disowning it. The setting of the present book is decidedly intercultural, pluralistic—if I may be allowed to use the word pluralistically and not, as is usual, from the monocultural perspective that accepts the *mythoi* of the prevailing Western culture and opens up to an understanding of alternative worldviews by moving away from the "contemporary" point of view—unilaterally deciding what "contemporaneity" consists of, however aware it may be that the language it uses, of Latin and Western imprint, demands the adoption, at the risk of incomprehensibility, of not only precise grammatical models but also of endogenous paradigms of intelligibility.

More simply put, these pages intend to address a human and, therefore, universal phenomenon with a minimum of assumptions tied to the language in which this phenomenon is expressed—even if, inevitably, these assumptions remain tributary to the temporal and spatial constraints in which the author lives.

The occasion for the present work was an inaugural lecture I was to give during the first international symposium on mysticism held under the auspices of UNESCO in Barcelona in 2002. Dealing as it does with a theme that is crucial for our time and central in my own life, I rewrote it, without disproportionately increasing its length. The topic demands contemplation rather than excessive articulation.

I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to the organizers for inviting me and, as I was unable to deliver the lecture, suggesting that I should write it down at my own speed. I beg the reader's patience in reading it, as I tried to exercise patience in writing it. This book is not for the impatient. The first draft of these reflections was furnished with an infinity of footnotes and bibliographical references that, following the tradition of the *sūtras*, I have done without here in order to focus only on the living experience, although I still have to beg indulgence for the excessive density of the text. This text is merely a pretext for readers to weave their own. I have therefore refrained from bringing classical or modern authors into the argument. We are currently witnessing a renaissance of mysticism studies. Today's two-dimensional civilization, having reached its nadir, senses a need for a radical *metanoia* to recover the third dimension, which is Man's own. Even though the present book was written as a *post scriptum* to the above-mentioned symposium, the author has not forgotten

the numerous courses held at Harvard and at the University of California between 1966 and 1987 that support with arguments and references most of the theses I explain here.

Last, let me add that many of the ideas contained in the present study have already been expressed, introduced, or treated more explicitly in my other writings; an acquaintance with them might make clearer what I have synthesized in the present volume. In keeping with the spirit of this book I do not mention any reference of mine. The only thing I will not do is to apologize for the apparent repetitions, since in actual fact they are not such, if we learn to transcend the fragmentation of knowledge. Every idea, however similar to another it may seem, is not identical if it is not extrapolated from its context. The parts are only parts as long as they remain the parts of a more complete whole.

I conclude by thanking the many people who have helped me in my task. Some do not know that they were an inspiration to me, and others have preferred not to be mentioned, thus forcing me to embrace within my gratitude to Life all those who, in one way or another, have shared it with me.

R.P.

Tavertet

Feast of the Epiphany, 2005



## 8

# THE INTEGRAL HUMAN EXPERIENCE

### About the Title

I bless you, Father . . .

for hiding these things from the learned and the clever  
and revealing them to little children.

—Mt 11:25 (Lk 10:21)

The reader will notice that the outlook on our earthly journey that I have adopted in this book is that of a pilgrim who goes on foot rather than in a car driven on a well-laid-out motorway toward a destination fixed in advance and accepted without question. Life is constant “novelty.” “I shall gather flowers,” therefore, and “shall wander about these mountains and rivers,” if I may borrow from St. John of the Cross. Undoubtedly, however, I will not be *Homo viator*, the wayfarer, who “dwells in a land” that is no one’s and far from heaven, as St. Paul and Nāgārjuna among many others bring back to mind. Our “pastimes,” if Pascal will forgive us, are only a breathing space.

I was initially tempted to title this study, “The catholic experience,” but I feared that the irony might be misconstrued at the expense of the interpretation of a “complete experience” (*kath’holon*). If, however, “catholic” might have seemed biased, “holistic” (which stems from the same root) has other eclectic connotations quite removed from my purpose. In our times, “integral experience” has acquired an aftertaste of “integralism,” and the word “total” may have a “totalitarian” resonance.

I also decided against any other neologism, even if easily understandable, on the assumption that, starting from an Indo-European root, many homologues are extant in European languages, ranging from “fullness” to “plethoric,” not to mention the infinite number of derivatives and compounds. The “pleromatic experience” mentioned in so many Christian Scriptures would have seemed artificial and useless.

Thus, “the integral human experience” prevailed on its merit as a corrective of a reductionist view of Man to a simple “rational animal,” since “Man” represents merely an abstract concept—albeit an eminently practical one—extracted from the magma of reality as a whole, termed “cosmotheandric” elsewhere in my writings, to encompass both the material and the divine beyond the human.

Finally, I decided to keep the word "integral" in the title of this section, hoping that the integration of the other two dimensions of reality within the human would remain clear, an intuition somewhat obliterated by the almost overwhelming predominance of abstract and analytical thinking. We should remember that the etymology of *integral* is derived from *in* and *tangere* (from the root *teg*): untouched, intact, unmanipulated, not even by the mind.

Consequently, the book subtitle should be clear. Mysticism should not be seen as the special province of the few but rather as one essential dimension of humankind—although present in a somewhat withered form in today's technological and scientific culture, which approaches human reality through rigorously bifocal lenses (the senses and the ratiocinating reason), in spite of the protests of artists and the passive resistance of ordinary people. At the deepest root of such bifocal vision is an anthropology based on the dualism of body and soul, which has come to replace the tripartite anthropology of so many traditions, including the Judeo-Christian body, soul, and spirit, in which a third constitutive element of the whole human being cannot be reduced to the first two. The *body* is individual; the *soul* is individual (in the body), but it cannot be individualized. We communicate in a world of the intellect that does not belong to us individually: the logical principles are universal within their own domain; the evidence of reason is the "acting intellect's" estate, and so forth. The *spirit*, in contrast, is not individual and evades individualization; it is not our own, and we have no power whatsoever over it. The spirit blows where, when, and how it will, and through it we join a new order of reality that manifests itself within our consciousness and more precisely in the mystical consciousness.

Here we must add, albeit as an aside, that the anthropological cultures of both Africa and the East are not dualistic. This point explains why Western individualism, which may represent the special talent of the West, is alien to these cultures; it also explains the lesser resistance to a mystical dimension that is more congenial to the East, as we shall have occasion to see again.

This seeming digression by way of introduction is germane to our topic. Few words have been subject to as much wear and tear as "mysticism" has. From the moment it parted from silence at its utterance the word has become so impoverished that its "referent" has been reduced to mere idea, with more or less distinctness or clarity. One need only consider the avalanche of so-called information regarding mysticism. The *verbum entis* has been degraded to *verbum mentis* and the latter to *flatus vocis*. Even the *vox* itself has severed its primordial link with *him that speaks*: it has become a sound wave.

### The Ambivalence of the Word

These notes aspire to listen to the hidden melody that lets us find harmony in the theme. The word "mysticism" attracts and repels people in equal number. Mysticism is such a vague and polysemic word that it must be defined in terms



of limits to avoid adding to the prevalent cacophony. We are being robbed of the meaning of words. Not for nothing Kong Fuzi (Confucius) used to say that the renewal of human culture began with the retrieval of the primordial meaning of words.

"Zen has nothing to do with mysticism: it is clearer than crystal." "The believer in a personal God cannot be a mystic." "Only he who knows God experientially is a mystic." "Religion is the opposite of mystical spirituality." "Whoever has a concrete image of a God may be a believer, but is not a mystic." "Only a Christian can be a true mystic because he believes in the divine Incarnation." "True mysticism is nonecclesiastical." "The secular is the antithesis of the mystical." "One must speak of enlightenment and not of mystical experience." "Intellectual consciousness is the true door to mysticism." "Mysticism dwells in feelings and not in reason." "Mysticism resides in the very root of reason." "All mystical intuitions have a common denominator." "Reducing mysticism to what all mystical experiences have in common is pure, abstract rationalism." "Mysticism is the babbling of the unconscious when it comes out of its hiding place." "Mysticism is the refuge of mental cowardice seeking self-justification."

I could go on quoting countless other opinions.

A wise and ancient Castilian expression has it thus: "*Cada maestrillo tiene su librillo*" (Every tuppenny schoolmaster has his ha'penny book), which in more academic parlance means having polysemic vocabulary. Any term that is not a formal abstraction is a metaphor. Even when we say that silence is the language of mysticism, the term "silence" itself is metaphorical precisely when we decide to give it a meaning "beyond" (another metaphor) the mere absence of sound.

Be that as it may, mysticism is a phenomenon belonging to all times and places and represents a "human invariant"—even if it is not a "cultural universal," since every culture interprets the invariant in its own way. Mankind is not fulfilled (although we often make do) solely by what we perceive through the senses, comprehend with the mind, or feel with the heart: we also have an intuition, albeit vague, that there is something "more," beyond what can be touched, known, or felt. Perhaps it is the sensation, hidden in the innermost Man like a mysterious root, whose reality can neither be emphasized nor dismissed. This "something" (whether something more or less) has been interpreted as the particular milieu of the mystic—even if I propose to call mysticism the totality of experience, for reasons I hope to make clear in the course of this book. Mysticism does not distract us from the commonplace but links it to the "tempiternal." A Jesuit novice once observed a fellow of his in the heat of play during the recreation hour and, fearing that he had lost sight of the "constant presence of God" of which they had been told, asked him, "Brother, what would you do if death should take you in the next moment?" The man, who would become St. Aloysius Gonzaga, replied seraphically, "I would go on playing!" The mystic discovers eternity in the instant—and goes on playing with gusto the game of Life.

## The Place of Mysticism

Mysticism poses the ultimate questions of which the human spirit is capable. The dichotomy between the "life of the mind" and the "life of mysticism" is lethal to both: it deprives the former of its spirit and the latter of its language. The life of the mind is, first and foremost, Life and not simply mental lucubration. The mystical life represents the apex of the life of Man, the endowment with consciousness both of self and of reality—albeit imperfectly—for as far as knowledge is concerned there is no ignoring the intellect.

The study of mysticism, therefore, must not wander through the so-called mystical phenomena but must come to face the very foundation of human life and of reality as a whole. Thus, we shall have to deal with these issues, if only to let them come to the fore with discretion. The reason I belabor this point is that the approach of this meditation is intercultural, and consequently I must attempt to go beyond the Western mind-set—without, obviously, leaving it out altogether. What I am referring to is the genius of analytical thought, which excels at specialization. The great classifications of modern Western thought are the result of this analytical vision, as the monumental edifice of modern science is witness. Interpreting the mystical experience as just another of these special fields is what has most contributed to its marginalization, even though many scholars of mysticism place this experience on the highest plane of the human scale. The whole thrust of the present study is to draw the necessary distinctions without this leading to separations. It follows that I am constrained to make reflections that many would label as philosophical—but that are inevitable because of the interconnectedness of all things, as almost every culture has come to acknowledge: "*sarvam sarvātmakam*" (Abhinavagupta); "*quodlibet in quolibet*" (Nicholas of Cusa)—"everything in every thing." And here we discover a dual *forma mentis* or way of thinking: one is concerned with the specific (because it thinks it will be able to find the *essence* of things in it) and another in the generic (because it believes it can glimpse the *truth* of things in it). Already the *Gītā* distinguished between complete knowledge (entire, whole, and perfect—*keṛtsna*) and incomplete knowledge (imperfect, partial, analytical—*akṛtsna*).

When investigating the *specific* by putting it on the same level as the *essence*, one loses its *intrinsic* connection with total reality—and dialectics alone can build the logical bridge between what is A and what is not A. This creates a split within reality, since what is specific is then identified with what is essentially different and reason cannot function in any other way. This is the challenge that modern mysticism throws down to contemporary analytical thinking. For experience to be complete, the third eye is not sufficient—as I shall have occasion to repeat.

Analytical and classifying thought usually reserves the word "mystic" either for a vague appendix that the rational mind has not yet assimilated or for a glorious halo around consciousness, the patrimony of the few. In either case, the term refers to a specialized field—the most "primitive" and a-critical or the most noble or sublime. No one has a monopoly on the meaning of words. We therefore need another term

to encompass the totality of human experience. In the absence of an alternative I use the word "mysticism" not only for the first (or the ultimate) experience of Man but also for the human consciousness that comprises them all. Such is the thesis of the present book, in harmony with the traditional principle that the authentically superior includes the inferior—without overwhelming it or depriving it of its own ontonomy. I use the word "superior" in the evangelical sense of the "first" as the "last" and in the etymological sense according to which what is uppermost is there precisely because it is standing on what is lower down—which makes it possible.

Let me emphasize: The place of mysticism is not in the stratosphere but on this "earth of men," even though the mystic is bold enough to climb its highest peaks. The mystic does not dream of landing on the moon, where there is no air, but he attempts the ascent of Mount Tabor, Sinai, Meru, Kailasa, Sumbur (Semeru), Haraberazaiti (Harbuz), and so on—these terrestrial locations, that is, where heaven and earth meet.

### The Mystical Word

It would be ingenuous and pretentious, as well as simply wrong, to present the mystical experience as the remedy for all the current perplexities regarding philosophy or as the panacea for all the so-called evils of humanity. It would be just as irresponsible to minimize the relevance of the criticism of rational (not just rationalist) reductionism that mystical experience per se implicitly conveys. The ultimate resource of Man is experience. However, experience cannot be impounded by individual subjectivity or find refuge in a merely transcendent objectivity. The problems are still pending, but the human horizon is getting brighter.

Correctly understood, mysticism is the realm of freedom: it liberates humanity of its transcendent and immanent conditionings without, however, letting it slide into anarchical libertinism, since it opens up the path to realizing Man's identity. The question, "Who are we?" perhaps synthesizes best how the problem should be posed, as we shall try to explain.

The mystic emerges when Man realizes and grasps the fact that not only does the word reveal what words themselves say, but that the speaking itself is shrouded in a final veil that the word cannot lift, because the word itself is the very veil that re-reveals reality by veiling it. One speaks of what lies hidden in the telling. For this reason, mysticism has been said to be the cause or the effect of the crisis of language. Such a claim was born within the bosom of modernity, which has accepted nominalism as an all-inclusive myth. When words are considered as mere signs, that is, as more or less arbitrarily identifying things, certainly mysticism appears as a crisis of language, since when it emerges from its own silence, mysticism addresses these questions using its own language. Evidence of this is monotheistic mysticism's interpretation of the names of God, which makes positivist nominalism falter, since the Name of God is not viewed as a mere appellative label. "But we have the Name!" as Mosheh ben Maimon (Maimonides), that genius of thirteenth-century Cordoba, cried out in joy. Lucubrations on the words of the Indian *Brahmana* and of the Jewish

Kabbalah, for instance, are more than mere logomachies to be interpreted within their own context—evident exaggerations excepted. In most cultures, the natural function of the word is to veil and reveal reality, as already pointed out. One of the Fathers of the Christian church makes a suggestive comparison with feminine dress, the attraction for which lies in their ability to veil and unveil the beauty of the body. The authentic word veils and reveals the glory (δόξα, *doxa*) of the real. Mysticism is that vision—for which all the senses are needed. As we shall again have occasion to observe, it is probable that Gregory of Nyssa had no knowledge of a hymn from the *Rg-veda* that sings, "The word is revealed to some as the bride bedecked in her finery goes forth to meet her bridegroom." Could these "some" be the mystics?—and these "some" be the very same who can fall in love?

"At the beginning was the Word," say several sacred texts of India, Christianity, and Africa; however, the Word is not the Beginning. The mystic aspires to this Beginning of the Word. The Beginning *prior to* the Word (which was *at* the Beginning), but which is inseparable from the Word, is *Silence*. God was silence but God was not *in* the silence, says a biblical text (generally badly rendered) reporting the experiences of the prophet Elijah. For this reason, true mystics do not care about revealing the mystery, since even if they did raise the veil, neither the eye of the senses nor the mind's eye would see anything. However, nothingness is dangerous. Mysticism has no paths, Abhinavagupta and St. John of the Cross said along with many others. There is no marked path because mysticism is all about goals. Herein lies the great danger of mysticism: the danger inherent to all ultimate things (which is called reality), which, as such, do not allow any meta-real criterion. *Within* reality, truth is a criterion unto itself; there is no meta-truth. Not for nothing did the Scholastics call it a "transcendental."

For this reason, mysticism does not possess an extrinsic truth criterion beyond its own experience. Pseudo-mysticism, on the other hand, can be fully revealed and betrays itself, much as a bunch of keys alerts an alarm device. Authentic mysticism does not possess, and does not need, keys for interpretation or safety devices. "Alas for you . . . who have taken away the key of knowledge" (κλεῖς τῆς γνώσεως, *kleis tēs gnōseōs*), says Jesus to the lawyers. A key is needed to open up to knowledge (and this is the function of a master), but once the latch has been sprung there is no use for the key. If it is possible to say what is not authentically mystical, we cannot penetrate mysticism proper except by barely feeling its Presence—maybe by hearing its *silent music*, by perceiving an elusive waft of its fragrance, by catching a glimpse of its blinding light.

I report here the words of a mystic and poet, Rabindranath Tagore, who translated the words of another mystic, Kabir, a weaver who probably could not write, and one of the first to overcome denominational differences in the fifteenth century.

It is the music of the meeting of soul with soul;

It is the music of the forgetting of sorrows;

It is the music that transcends all coming in and all going forth.

No one has ever seen God, says St. John, echoing a long tradition. Silence is a fundamental category of mysticism—so Buddhism asserts. The last veil of reality cannot be revealed; that is objectified, although even the mystic is not pure subjectivity. Reality cannot be pure objectivity (we are in it) or mere subjectivity (it transcends us). Mysticism still attracts because of its very perilousness and ambiguity. "*Sat-asat-anirvacanīya*" is the "inexpressibility (between) Being and Non-Being," says the *vedānta*.

The *pūrvapakṣin*, the opponent in the Indian tradition, or the *videtur quod* (the first appearance) of Scholasticism, could object that reality does not have veils, and precisely because of this fact it is called "reality," or Being. This is the temptation of a certain form of (pseudo-philosophical) mysticism: the claim to lift (uncover) all that is veiled. To this the *sed contra* rejoins that, certainly, we refer to bare reality when we use the word "Being," but we are unable to say it without thinking it—because, if we say it, in some way we think it already. In the utterance, however, we are already covering reality with the veil of the word—besides the additional layer of our interpretation. The mystic answers that it is unnecessary to utter reality or, simply, remains silent—keeps his mouth shut (μῦω). To answer by silence is a reply in itself, as the Buddha's disciples found out and as Pilate failed to do, as it seems, when confronted with the silence of the Nazarene. The mystic word veils and reveals.

We are now touching on one of the burning issues of mysticism. When one mystic acknowledges agreement with what another mystic says, it signifies that he believes that he has communed with what the other means to say (what is re-vealed in what he says). Intelligence alone cannot penetrate what the other means to say. Only he who loves another can enter into what the other wants (and says). This wanting, however, does not interpret and therefore does not judge. Only he who loves does not judge—as we shall repeat again later. When Jesus exhorts us not to judge, he invites us to the mystical vision—which sees (and therefore discerns), but does not judge. Jiddu Krishnamurti suggested the same thing. Thus, the mystic holds his tongue—and the Buddha does not answer what were thought to be the major metaphysical questions of his time. But what is it that fills this silence? Either there is no reply or it must be said that there is *nothing*: an absence of the Word. But is Being also lacking? We are unable to distinguish Being from Nothingness. What could we distinguish it from, which is not already Being? We cannot even assert that they are "the same thing" since, in the words of an *Upaniṣad*, "We have reached a level in which the words return [*nivartante*] to the mind" that thought them. This is a thought to which we shall return, albeit indirectly.

### Different Languages

The growing interest in mysticism is a sign of our times that augurs well. Mysticism has ceased to be a private field for specialists and moved into the common ground of popular as well as political and academic life—where, deep down, it always has been, albeit inconspicuously, not always clearly or under this name. What else could

be the cause of the lack of inner peace or joy among nations whose people claim to be "developed" and wealthy? They are instinctively searching for something that the so-called state of well-being fails to provide for them—and I do not mean to give the strength of a sociological law to this observation. That "Man does not live by bread alone, but on every *word* that comes from the mouth of God" makes it all the more urgent that we should focus on language itself. Pascal was awestruck at the thought of the "silence of sidereal space," while others view hell as silence. The Word, which "is" not the Beginning, "was" joined to the Beginning. But it cannot be separated from its Beginning. Hence, not every language is a salvific word; not every word is a sacrament. This is why the Gospel tells us that every word of ours will be brought to account that is ineffectual—devoid of energy (*ἄργον*, *argon*) or strength. A word from the mouth of those who believe in what they say and that is coming from a pure heart produces very different effects from those of the same word repeated by rote like a lesson, however correct the meaning, which one expects to be objective. The advice of the wise is not the same as the scholar's lesson. Every word is a quaternity, made up of the speaker, who is spoken to, what is spoken of, and the material aspects of speaking—as I have said elsewhere and will continue to repeat. But there are very different languages.

*Scientific language* has its own *raison d'être*. Scientific language aspires to be univocal and to make use of falsifiable and quantifiable concepts, but it has no intention to be salvific. Strictly speaking, it does not even pretend to be a "word"; it is enough for it to be a "script" requiring knowledge for its decipherment. One of the fathers of the modern scientific method, Galileo Galilei, wrote that "the great book of the universe [ . . . ] is written in the language of mathematics"—forgetting that the universe is not a book, that one also has to be able to read it and that reading something is not the thing itself. Scientific language observes reality through the prism of scientific light—which claims to be white (having thus eliminated other wavelengths). Exactness is its category; rigor, its method; demonstration, its criterion; concept, its instrument. All these means are not without their value—but, in the end, they are only intermediaries.

*Philosophical language* starts from these scientific postulates, which, although they have a legitimacy of their own in their field, may be reductionist if attributed to reality as universal models of intellection. Reality seen through the lens of science already suffers from a distortion process of which the true scientist is, in general, aware—although the "layman" may not realize this because of the resounding attainments of techno-science. However, the lens of philosophy, too, may distort reality. The case is more serious as, while the lens of science does not claim to encompass all reality, philosophy aspires to knowledge of the whole. Broadly speaking, from Descartes onward in the West, philosophy has used the lens of rational knowledge to provide a "clear and distinct" vision of reality with claims to universality. A vague idea is a confused idea, but reality is perhaps more than an idea, clear or confused as it may be, and conceptual language (which is very clear and distinct) itself can become reductionist. Yet again, can reality be reduced only to what the mind

perceives, clearly or confusedly? And let it not be said that, "ideally," it is an infinite Mind that clearly and distinctly sees all, because it is then that the real is reduced to an Idea—accepting Parmenides's postulate that identifies Thought with Being. Initially, philosophy claimed to be a salvific language, but, because of the *avatāra* of history, it has since succumbed to the temptation of becoming a specialized form of knowledge and its language has contracted, eventually leaving a vacuum.

*Mystical language* claims to fill that vacuum and cannot content itself with the reductionist view of using only the language of rationality. The mystic is somehow aware that reality soars beyond the sphere of rational language. This accounts for the affinity between mysticism and *artistic language*, and with that of poetry in particular. Both are symbolic languages. An authentic mysticism, however, does not forsake rationality, even if it aims at transcending reality. Unlike the artistic language, it cannot be content with subjective reality, but aspires to a certain objectivity—even if inseparably from subjectivity. *Poetic language* describes states of consciousness and does not pretend to any other reality than that of the states of consciousness themselves to which, on the other hand, it does not deny a certain trans-subjective validity. Mystical language demands of those stages of human consciousness that they also describe states of this reality, which goes beyond the subjective reality. The intentionality behind the language of poetry, or of artistic language in general, is to transport or elevate us to a level of reality usually hidden from those who do not know contemplation. Its category is Beauty; its method, inspiration; its criterion, pleasure; and its instrument, art—even if its interpretative canons are not univocal; what is "beautiful" for some may be interpreted as "ugly" by others. The intention behind mystical language, on the other hand, is to transport and elevate us to the *ultimate* level of reality, generally hidden from those who do not know contemplation. Its category is love-filled knowledge, "*cognitio experimentalis*" (St. Bonaventure), or knowledge-filled love, "*amor ipse notitia est*" (William of St.-Thierry). Its method is intuition; its criterion, liberty; its instrument, the symbol; its intentionality, reality. Let us recall that for the symbol to be symbol, that is, for it to symbolize, the participation of our whole being is required: "When your eye is clear (*ἀπλοῦς*, *aplaus*), your whole body, too, is filled with light."

No conscious act can, strictly speaking, disregard the symbolic element insofar as its meaning is not exhausted with its conceptualization and consciousness, being consciousness of a particular object, views it always within a limited horizon of which it can also be conscious. Needless to say, the symbolic factor presents degrees and variations. The symbol is the springboard that permits the leap from the object (the meaning) to the subject (the signifier), from concept to intuition, from intellect to *what* is intellectualized—without the leap breaking the connection and thus allowing us to land on our feet. And this, without alienation from ourselves, without separating immanence from transcendence and without falling into dualism or ending up in monism, is the great temptation of a certain mysticism. The mystical symbol does not indicate a particular entity; it is meant to represent the whole from the point of view of concreteness. This is how the mystical language speaks of

God, Love, Being, Nothingness and Emptiness, and also of Goodness, Beauty, and Truth—in short, of Reality, even if the focus is pinpointed on a particular being. Alternatively, as I have already pointed out and as I must repeat, the mystical symbol tells us about the Life that is in us and that surrounds us. The mystic lives Life in its fullness: “I came that they may have life (ζωή, *zōē*) and have it more abundantly (περισσόν, *perisson*)” is the message of Christ. I have already described mysticism as the experience of Life.

At this point, there is a problem that we can no longer avoid. I have just said that the symbolizing power of the symbol consists in catapulting (συμβάλλειν, *symbol-lein*) us from objective, conceptual consciousness into participatory consciousness: the leap from the object (the symbol) to the subject (for which the symbol is such). Once the subject is reached, however, how can we go back to transcend it, so that our intuition may also have an objective value? This is the fundamental role of the symbol: to help us reach the “immediate intuition” that a-dualistically unites the subject to the object. To say that Man is a symbolic being is equivalent to stating that Man is open to the mystery that transcends and enfolds him.

On the whole, mystical language has been misconstrued by the modern Western mentality because of the prevailing nominalism that has been the medium of its interpretation. Nominalism and individualism share deeply connected roots, which are all too often overlooked. If the subject of language is the individual, the individual is the ultimate referee on the meaning of words, and thus what matters is the number of individuals—hence our need for the mass media and the advertising industry. Politics becomes no more than a technique to reach a majority. The link between the word and the thing loses its vigor. In mysticism, on the other hand, word and thing are not separate, although, paradoxically, there is a gaping abyss between the two. This is why mystical language is neither univocal nor conceptual. We have already said that the mystical language is a symbolic one, but the symbol cannot be perceived when it is interpreted simply as metaphor, coiled as it is around its ontological consistency which unites it to the subject for whom the symbol is the symbol. Mystical language is ontological and not just epistemological. If, then, epistemology and ontology are kept separate, mystical language will often be interpreted (in order to “rescue” it) as merely poetic language that can thus be indulged and allowed to say what it pleases, since it does not actually affect reality.

Mystical language aspires to express experience *sui generis*—here I do not mean a “specific” experience. Mysticism is an experience of reality and, as such, can only be expressed, albeit in an imperfect form, through symbols. Symbolic knowledge requires participatory knowledge between the knower and the known. As the Prophet Isaiah said, “If you will not believe, you will not understand,” according to the general interpretation of Christian tradition—even if impugned by the ingenious Abelard who, to find a rational posit for faith (as Kant later did, too), inverted the proposition: “If you do not understand, you will not believe.” A better intention could not be found, and this was the dawning of so-called modernity—including, of course, its many successes. Faith, therefore, ceases to be an experience and becomes a system of



beliefs. The "Symbol of the Apostles" is turned into Christian doctrine—and from there to ideology is a short step. A symbol, as I said before, is not objective per se. Strictly speaking, no object is purely objective; it is always an *ob-iectum* referring to a *sub-iectum*. The realm of objectivity began with rational consciousness and its claim to universal validity. This claim derives from a *theologoumenon* that has become secularized, such as when the "concept" is "conceived," like the Son "conceived by" the Goddess of reason, or God is made to speak in concepts. In a word, and to repeat, the symbol is a symbol only when it symbolizes—that is to say, when there is a communion between the symbolized, the symbol, and those who participate in the particular compass of the symbolic. Failing this (when mysticism loses its symbolic dimension and is reduced to a system of concepts), one lapses into the confusion (Kant's *Schwärmerei*) that modernity has rightly criticized.

### The Underlying Anthropology

The terrain of mysticism has traditionally been described as that of an enlightened faith: *fides oculata*, as the Scholastics called it, or *anubhava* according to the *vedānta*, conveying the meaning of a direct experience—ignoring the repetition, since experience is experience because it is a "contact" without intermediaries. But as we shall discuss further later on, faith is not enlightened if the enlightenment does not embrace the senses and the mind as well, if the three eyes are not wide open—which is not to say that the mystic is a "know-it-all," a *polymath*, according to Heraclitus's critical definition. "*Omnis anima nobilis tres habet operationes [ . . . ] operatio animalis [ . . . ] intellectibilis et [ . . . ] divina*" (Every noble soul has three activities: the activity of the senses, of the intellect, and of the divine), as we find in the famous *Liber de causis*, wrongly attributed to Aristotle, which was mandatory study in the monastic, episcopal, and university schools of the West for almost a millennium—even though it had neither Jewish nor Christian roots.

On the basis of this principle, a further explanation is necessary, especially in these days of political pessimism attributable to the global situation of mankind. I have already said that in the pages that follow there is an implicit premise of a tripartite anthropology. Thus, Man is construed as a "whole" formed by a body, a soul, and a spirit. This is within a nonindividualistic, and therefore optimistic, vision of the human being. I have been criticized for overlooking the beast that lurks within all of us (and may animals forgive me!). The *sūtras* that follow certainly do not overlook an almost universal *mythos* of the cultural history of humanity: the often-misunderstood idea of "original sin," whether it is called wounded or corrupt nature, death instinct, diabolical forces, congenital selfishness, suffering, or simply evil. Evil does exist, but the dialectic struggle against it fails to destroy it. Humanity in general is perhaps beginning to realize that the practical dogma of modern times is Hobbes's "*homo homini lupus*," which has led to the paranoia of security (a corollary of the Cartesian obsession with certainty) and may lead to the destruction of Man through Man's own works. Man has neither claw nor fang like the wolf, but

he possesses inhuman bombs and weapons, be they atomic, chemical, biological, or economic—although people have tried to sweeten what is a struggle for existence by calling it “competitive edge.” The worst wrongs have been perpetrated on the theory of the “lesser evil.” In other words, without the mystical experience, Man has no reason not to try and eliminate whomever he sees as an obstacle to achieving happiness, growth, or fulfillment.

Perhaps we should pause here for a while and consider this capital question and our commitment not to separate mysticism in its “loftiest” form from the most ordinary human life. Idealistic anthropology, which sees Man as an animal—albeit one endowed with a mind—makes plausible the hypothesis behind the theory of evolution, the basic dogma of which is the survival of the fittest by natural selection. The mystical objection is not, strictly speaking, theological but anthropological. If Man is not also spirit, then natural selection, even if not rigorously scientific, would seem to be the most likely hypothesis. Thence, only a pragmatic ethics may be justified: “One does good because in the end this is what yields the best results.” This belief, however, besides never having been validated, holds no certainty in the short term. “God favors the biggest armies,” as the cynics like to say. Mercy is seen as a weakness and forgiveness as irrational, and so on. Civilization has thus turned into the simple institutionalization of natural violence in defense of the less strong in virtue of superior numerical strength, which may be achieved also through natural selection. In short, antiterrorism finds here its justification. Crusades of all kinds have been waged to establish the reign of justice and peace—be it called God’s or democracy’s.

Let us put this differently: Although it may seem paradoxical to a certain two-dimensional mentality, the mystical experience, by revealing the “divine” core of Man, cures us of a nostalgic longing for a return to a “lost Paradise” and grasps the irony of the God of the Bible posting “in front of the garden of Eden . . . the great winged creatures and the fiery flashing sword” to prevent Man from falling into the temptation of abjuring his human condition and yearning to return to Paradise, thereby renouncing the discovery of the “kingdom” of our interiority (which is not exempt from other hazards).

This is why the issue of mysticism is an anthropological problem linked with what Man is—and it cannot be separated from the theological problem of what God is or from the cosmological problem of what the world is. We are now getting to the heart of the matter. Our theme is a nonreductionist view of reality with which we cannot avoid mentioning the philosophical premises of such a vision. I would not be displeased for this short book to be considered as a compendium of philosophy—intended in its universal sense as *opus contemplationis*.

### The Mystical Pilgrimage

I have already mentioned the possible objection that what I call mystical is not meant as such in everyday language. I answer that, because of the rationality of all reality, the political aspect of language may not be disregarded. The seriousness of this

problem is compounded by the fact that nowadays the influence of the information media imposes a superficial and mechanistic language that breaks with thousands of years of human traditions. This is justified by the myth of the linear progress of human history, at the apex of which we place ourselves. We speak, for instance, about "artificial intelligence," thus giving "intelligence" and "art" meanings that are in absolute contradiction with what these words have hitherto meant. Indeed, only the mystical vision can open for us the third dimension of reality and cure us of the epidemic of superficiality now prevailing. The conception of mysticism described within these pages is the more traditional one, although, like any living tradition, the very act of communicating it constantly renews it. A static and immutable tradition is not *tradition*—it is not transmitted. Many misunderstandings regarding mysticism, in actual fact, arise from different uses of language.

Therefore, I limit myself to clarifying my own language. Words carry no copyright, but we should explain what meaning we attribute to them. As my contribution to this linguistic clarification, I propose nine aphorisms, each with a commentary pared down to a minimum. I emphasize the fact that all I am doing is linguistic clarification on what mysticism is supposed to mean, and not entering into its meanderings. Strictly speaking, my intention would be just this, but it is impossible to describe the mystical experience without entering into the cultural field of humanity that was there before the intricate forest of mysticism grew. It is impossible to describe what one does not know and one cannot know without "getting into" the known, and indeed modifying it by the very act of knowing it—however respectful we may be. We must also be conscious of our own limits and apply a certain degree of approximation and uncertainty to all our statements. It is only if we become aware of these factors that we will be able to take our first step: every human statement is provisional and contingent. The forest of mysticism, however, does not let itself be penetrated so easily. The mystics themselves confirm that the forest of mysticism is fraught with dangers and lacks well-laid paths. They also tell us that mysticism is ineffable. But how shall we speak of the ineffable? The answer is both easy and difficult: by going beyond the confines of rationality without being prejudicial to it, speaking plainly of it, and by saying that one did not try to say what one has said. "He who has ears, let him hear." We all have ears: we must just make them keener. This is something that could be my justification for this whole work.

There is, however, a third step, a third obstacle to be surmounted in this ascent of Mounts Meru, Sinai, Carmel, Fuji, Popocatepetl. We must bare the feet of our reason. We need to carry our footwear (reason) by hand, or perhaps we should be content to respectfully walk around (*pradākṣiṇa*) Mount Kailāsa more in a feminine attitude of acceptance than in a masculine one of conquest. My purpose is not to talk about mystical *phenomena*, but about the mystical experience. As I shall try to explain, this experience is not only ineffable but it is also immediate, and its immediacy is destroyed if we reflect upon it.

If the first dragon defending the castle on the mountain lets us pass, on condition that we leave our mind behind, the second guardian will let us open a breach in the

wall if our heart is pure, that we may better hear the breath of air from the peak. The third giant will strip us of all our baggage of evaluations and certainties—letting us ascend naked to the castle, barefoot and without interpretation. Only on our way down the mountain shall we don again our intellectual garb and compose all the *sūtras* that follow. Let us remember that the experience of which we shall speak is not pure experience—the *e* of *sūtra* 7—but the *E* mediated by multiple factors that, like thick clothing, are protective and permit us to transit through this world.

Clothing is important, it is true, and one cannot go bare on this earth. This is not the “Earthly Paradise.” Mysticism finds its most natural habitat in silence, but Man is a traveller in the land of people—and people have speech. Indeed, mystics have spoken a great deal. The purpose of the next chapter of the present work is precisely to describe some of these languages.

As we shall see, the text uses quotations from classical authors who are also from other cultures.

I intend, on the one hand, to widen the horizon, and on the other, to show that the question is not purely to be seen from a Christian perspective or from that of any particular religion. If Christian references abound more than those of other religions, it is because I have chosen to use a parlance that is closer to the language in which I write.

## 9

### NAVASŪTRĀNI\*

*Athāto brahma-jijñāsā*

Now the aspiration is to know all Reality.

—*Brahma-sūtra* I.1.1

Having roughly outlined the path, let us now get ready to walk along it by following a single thread, the thread of experience. The reader should not expect a treatise on mysticism, or even less a treatise on any particular form of mysticism, whether "denominationally" religious or not. The linking of these *sūtras* aspires to be that of a garland fit to adorn the body of any human being who is ready to admit to being something more than a machine for rational computation.

According to the tradition of the *sūtra*, to succeed in formulating a single *sūtra* is much harder than writing a whole treatise on the topic. The *sūtra* is not a synthetic way of thinking—that is, the synthesis between a series of complex ideas. The *sūtra* is a simple way of thinking. I doubt if analytical thought can be applied to it and if one can claim that it contains "potentially" everything that may be later deduced from it. The meaning of the *sūtra* cannot be "extracted" by deduction, nor can it be reached by pure induction. Perhaps, like the aphorisms of the Sybil, the *sūtra* does not "mean" anything, but simply suggests. To put it better, a *sūtra* is an "invitation" to other ways of thinking that are in harmony with it to mingle with its own. It implies a pattern of relation to reality that is different from that of simple reason. It may just be that the *sūtra* is to be thought—and by thinking I mean the weighing of love, of which every thing is possessed, to reach the place assigned to it within the harmony of the universe in which it will be able to come to "rest" and feel in its proper place. Thinking is not calculating. Thinking is something other than a mental operation of deduction and induction, with or without extrapolation. To think is to make the effort of discovering one's εὐταξία (*eutaxia*, moderation) "*in qua intelligitur ordinis conservatio*," as Cicero puts it; to think is the act of knowing and preserving one's right place, the "good order" of things without violating them. The exasperated search for truth can prevent

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\* "Nine sūtras," in Sanskrit.

us from recognizing it. The *sūtras* are objects for pondering—for thinking in the aforementioned, contemplative sense.

Calling the following “aphorisms” *sūtras* is not a form of mad exoticism. It is my hope that they really prove to be aphorisms (ἀπὸ-ὀρισμὸς ἀφορίζειν), that is, that they show what they mean on the horizon of our consciousness.

Hence the accompanying commentary.

### **Sūtra 1: Mysticism Is the Integral Experience of Reality**

“Integral” is used as an adjective in this first *sūtra* to cover both the predicate and the complement of the phrase. It is thus not repeated after “reality,” because if experience is to be integral at all, it has to encompass reality as a whole, and as such not merely a part or a single manifestation thereof. We have already mentioned the synonyms (“complete,” “holistic,” and “pleromatic”) and, to avoid sounding needlessly baroque, we shall use the simplest term, which also suggests an intact and therefore complete form of experience, which is entire, pure, and spotless—without addition, “without gloss” as St. Francis would say. In the present case, the integral experience is the one that neither interpretation nor intermediation can touch: it is the pure, whole, “intact” experience.

I must admit I would have preferred repeating in the title “experience of Life” rather than “reality,” if only to avoid the professional bias of academic philosophy. The object of philosophical thought is indeed reality, which is often identified with Being. The object of conceptual thought certainly is tending toward Truth (of Being or reality), which cannot be seen but only thought of—as a concept. “Reality” as a word, however, carries a conceptual burden from which it cannot free itself without difficulty. The word “life,” on the other hand, is not so easy to conceptualize. We think “reality,” but we experience life directly—even though we can and must reflect on it afterward. The concept of Life comes after the experience of our life.

Having said this, I chose to use the word “reality” in the end to avoid the opposite stumbling block of a more or less superficial vitalism in which thought would have no place. Nevertheless, I have stuck to the title of the book as it is because I believe it is what it is about. Strictly speaking, “life” and “reality” are synonyms with very different connotations. I could also have described mysticism as the “(integral) experience of ourselves,” but a disquisition of the meaning of the words would have also been required in this case; we are an image of the Everything after all. With these caveats we shall use these three types of experience as homeomorphic equivalents.

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To avoid understandable misconceptions, mysticism is usually described as the experience of *ultimate* reality, meaning the supreme (ultimate) reality that is not divisible into parts. This presupposes a pyramidal vision of reality. On the highest step of reality would stand a God—a Supreme, and also simple, Being. This defini-

tion has enjoyed considerable success and has been prevalent for millennia among Abrahamic religions. Mysticism would thus be the "experience of God" as in fact it is still described in monotheistic circles for fear of lapsing into pantheism.

Thus, by a mere stroke of the pen, mysticism is wiped out from all those religions and worldviews in which the "Divine" does not represent the vertex of any pyramid. Indeed, for the best part of a century, this was the prevailing idea in the West among scholars of mysticism. If other religions aspired to the mystical experience, it was said, it would not be to *the* mysticism of the "Living God," supernatural and therefore authentic, but the numinous (and impersonal) experience of "Nature" and of a "Depth of Being" of a more or less metaphysical kind. Mysticism was thus classified and catalogued a priori in virtue of a (supposedly superior) criterion that was alien to experience itself—which thereby relinquished any claim to be "ultimate." This approach, however, excluded from mysticism all faiths that aspire to an integral experience of reality.

An important side effect of this description of the ultimate experience is that mysticism is elevated as the experience of transcendence, and its field of interest is not this world—secular and temporal (two adjectives that convey the same meaning). Mysticism, as the saying goes, does not meddle with the daily business of mankind: it is a specialized—and obviously superior—realm. Everything hinges on what is this "God." To avoid taking sides, for the time being, in the present discussion I have refrained from saying "the experience of God," and I provisionally introduced the word "reality," although this is not to say that it stops being less problematic but it seems to be more neutral—or more "ecumenical," in today's parlance.

In this *sūtra* I refrain from qualifying reality and thus reducing the field of mysticism to the "ultimate" within reality; this presupposes a classification according to a purely formal criterion with a bearing on reality itself. Once again we come up against Parmenides's dogma: Thought that classifies Being in virtue of a self-analysis of Thought—which includes Being itself within the same classification.

The difficulty and specificity of mysticism consist precisely in this: experiencing reality as an integral whole, which is neither the sum of its parts, far less a purely formal concept. Mysticism will tell us that there is a gate to complete reality (be it called God, Everything, Nothingness, Being, or anything else) shown to us in its fullness—even if we interpret it differently afterward from our peculiar, concrete standpoint, which, therefore, explains why we have a partial access, even though reality is indivisible. We are introducing here, on the one hand, an intercultural perspective and, on the other, a relatively novel concept, which, by forcing mysticism to descend from the Olympus of the Gods to the land of Man, makes it impossible any longer to be considered a specialization accessible only to the few, becoming a constitutive element of the human being.

This first *sūtra*, in fact, differs from the widespread definition found in many texts dealing *with* mysticism—as distinct from those actually recognized as mystic writings. This is due to the mode of thought (*forma mentis*) peculiar to Western "modernity" with regard to the interpretation of experience, mystical or otherwise.

There used to be an adage of Scholasticism that taught, "*Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*" (Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver). The analytical mind can only comprehend through analysis; the mind that is open to differences will find them anywhere, and the (specific) difference will be put on the same level as the essence. God is the Other (the absolute otherness) says, for instance, the Semitic mind-set; Brahman, on the contrary, is the absolute identity, the self (*ātman*), the Same, for the Indic thinker. According to the books I mentioned above, mysticism is a particular experience, unlike any other; this *sūtra* claims that mysticism is an integral experience—even if, as integral experience, it differs from all others.

I have already said that everything hinges on how we agree on the meaning of words. If mysticism is to be understood as a peculiar experience, it will have to be classified (which is a specialization of the Western mind) in order to be integrated into the range of human experience. The difficulty therefore lies in finding a criterion extrinsic to experience that may allow its integration. This criterion should be of a meta-experiential kind to embrace all (other) kinds of experience. Moreover, this criterion cannot be another experience, which would otherwise set off an infinite iteration. The criterion, therefore, cannot exist except as gratuitous postulation: reason, the senses, praxis, or whatever else will serve as a validation criterion for experience. We are now slipping into reductionism; there is no denying, though, that this may become quite useful for the *analysis* of mystical "phenomena." Reductionism narrows the fact or the phenomenon merely to what the filter of our criterion allows us to consider as valid: thus, for instance, the postulate of reason, basing itself upon itself (which is a vicious circle), does not admit of anything as real except what is rational—therefore identifying reality with what rationality recognizes as real.

If we insist on our acceptance of integral experience, it is because we are supported by so many witnesses of mysticism who will not be compartmentalized and who speak about their experience of *the* real, and not a mere part of it.

We are talking about an integral and complete experience that is neither partial nor segmented. What matters in the complete experience is, "Whoever sees me has seen the Father," where the difference in tense is not trivial, as I shall comment on later. The apostles see Jesus, but they must have their third eye opened for them to become aware that they have (also) seen the Father and to live out the complete experience of seeing not only Jesus but also the Christ. If I can see a flower as a flower, I can make up for myself a concept of flower by seeing other flowers, or an idea of a flower by discovering its specific essence; and yet I do not have the complete experience of a flower, of its Being, of its complete reality—unless one mixes up the flower with its concept. In fact, when our rational way of thinking is coupled with experience, we acquire the notion of a flower, but we are unable completely to experience the flower without experiencing all that the flower is; and the flower *is not* in the absence of the entire reality—in which and of which it is the flower. Before going into ecstasy, Dante sings in *Paradiso*,



Into the yellow of the Rose Eternal  
Nor did the interposing 'twixt the flower  
And what was o'er it of such plenitude  
Of flying shapes impede the sight and splendor.

These verses appear to find echoes in a poem of Śrī Aurobindo, who sings of the "Rose of God," and in a pun the great poet Rūmī makes between *gul* (rose) and *kull* (the mystery of the whole). Annemarie Schimmel has translated this as,

*Jede Rose, die in der äußeren Welt duftet,  
spricht vom Geheimnis des Ganzen.*

Every rose that wafts its scent into the outer world  
Speaks of the mystery of the Whole.

No doubt, "Being can be told of in many ways"—it is *said* (λέγεται, *legetai*). And it is indeed through the mystical vision that we become aware of the fact that reality cannot be reduced to what can be *said*, that it is not exclusively reduced to *logos*. The *experience* of the flower is not identical to the *cognition* of the concept of flower, which allows me to distinguish the flower from everything that is not-flower.

Even though there is an experience of the intellect (evidence), it is only an instance of human experience, and it should not be confused with the mystical experience, which is a complete experience. Mystical vision, in seeing the Flower, sees the Father (who is its Origin). Have not some mystics said that they see God in all things and all things in God—leaving the question of what they meant by this "God" unanswered? "He who sees the *ātman* in all things and all things in the *ātman*," as one *Upaniṣad* has it, "he will reach *brahman*"—once more leaving unspecified what this *ātman* and this *brahman* are.

Mysticism represents a countercurrent within culture; mysticism is a counterweight. I would venture to make a distinction between the prevailing Western kind and the Eastern—taking up the simplification, since there are "Westerners" within the Eastern world and "Easterners" in the West. The former is mainly anthropocentric ("Know thyself") in its ascent toward God, whereas the latter is mostly theocentric ("Know God") in its downward approach to self-knowledge. It should be obvious that to reach a transcendental "God" one should ascend toward him, and that to reach an immanent "God" one needs to descend to him. Let me quote two examples of the typically Eastern perspective. "To know oneself is to forget oneself; to forget one's own self is to know all things" (otherwise rendered as "to reach enlightenment"), wrote Dōgen, the great thirteenth-century Zen master who introduced the Sōtō School to Japan, at the beginning of his *Shōbōgenzō*.

My second example is drawn from the *Upaniṣads*. A devotee of Indra whom the God had invited to choose one gift did not dare to do so (out of respect for the Divinity) and asked Indra instead to grant him the blessing that he deemed

most beneficial for mankind. So Indra said to him, "Know me" (*mām eva vijāni*)—knowing that God lives in man's heart and that, by knowing God, one knows oneself. When Greece says, "Know thyself!" the assumption is that if we know ourselves well (what we are) we shall meet God. When India says, "Know me!" it is implying that this God will reveal to me who I am. Both movements are necessary, the ascent (Greece) and the descent (India). St. Augustine's genius expressed it well: "*Noverim te, noverim me*" (That I may know you [and] that I may know myself). We cannot give up our intellect's critical sense (anthropocentrism), but neither can we relinquish the proper meaning of our spirit (theocentrism). The integral experience is transcendental and immanent at the same time; this is the secret of *advaita*, or a-dualistic intuition. The experience of transcendence, as I shall mention again, can only occur by starting from immanence; the experience of immanence only makes sense in relation to transcendence. Immanence and transcendence are two notions that refer to this reality, which is neither one nor two. Reality is relational, like the Trinity.

In both cases it is an experience of *complete reality*. Reality as such has no parts; they would just be parts of reality. We can speak, for instance, of a material reality, or of another, spiritual reality; we can also distinguish degrees of reality, if we accept a formal classification criterion. All these distinctions about reality, however, are purely formal, designed by our mind, which itself is part of reality. In other words, mystical knowledge neither judges nor divides: it only sees.

When we say that reality has no parts, we are not claiming that our mind cannot divide reality into parts, but that both multiplicity and unity are assertions of the mind. Mysticism is more cautious; it neither asserts nor denies. For this reason it does not say that the flower is a *part* of reality, and neither does it claim that it is *all* reality. It would be better to say that the flower is a symbol of the whole, that *in* the flower *lies* all reality. It is evidently not an absolute (conceptual) knowledge but a concrete, integral experience. I am merely saying with different words what I shall go back to say again: that mysticism is an a-dualistic experience—*advaita*. It is an experience of reality, not of its parts—even though it only occurs in one part. The Spirit "will lead you to the whole truth," Jesus promised his disciples. Of course, the Spirit will not be leading us to all the truths that there are, but to the complete, undivided experience of reality. And very subtly, as the text says, it will guide us on the way (ὁδηγήσει, *hodēgēsei*) to the whole Truth—toward an existential path and not toward a mere cognition of the mind. He who lets himself be guided by the Spirit does not (mentally) "know" all the truths, but he is moving in that Truth that "makes us free." By "seeing" the flower, mystical experience "sees" (the whole) reality, even if it does not "see" all its parts; it makes us "walk in Beauty," as one expression of the Hopi language says. We move from the intellection of the *pars pro toto* to the intuition of the *totum in parte* even if, strictly speaking, the spatial metaphor (*pars*) applied to reality is much more disorienting. The flower that the mystic "sees" is (all) reality—*within* the flower. The flower that the intellectual knows is part of the reality—of the flower. Both are necessary. The *Gītā* makes a distinction between the

knowledge of the whole and that of its parts—as we have already mentioned and shall have occasion to say again.

We use the word “reality” as the ultimate symbol of the Whole (τὸ ὅλον [*to holon*] in Greece and *idam sarvam* in the *Upaniṣads*), not only inasmuch as it is, but also inasmuch as it is-not; inasmuch as it is thinkable and also inasmuch as we are aware that it is unthinkable—without going into further disquisition for now. Let me add, however, that when we say symbol *of the Whole* we do not refer to the Whole as something enveloping, abstract, and undifferentiating as with certain psychic phenomena of identification with the numinous. For our purpose, it is enough to state that what we mean by reality is everything that in one way or another enters the field of our consciousness—without further elaborating (as, for instance, Zubiri does beautifully). Mysticism is not an abstract vision. It does not see the Whole, but it sees the flower—in its entirety. The great difficulty of language consists in the substantialization of names, thereby individualizing them. For mysticism, all common nouns, the so-called substantives, are verbs. The flower, therefore, is a flower because it flowers in the garden of reality and “a cloud” is what clouds up the firmament of real life, both physically and metaphorically. Words, to the mystic, are like Arabic numbers to the physicist: while they represent the world of energy and matter for the one, to the other they symbolize the whole universe.

The rational mind cannot avoid answering a further question, and neither shall I, since I have already stated that mysticism is not irrational. The question is this: Does such a complete experience exist? Is this holistic experience even *possible*? Are the mystics raving when they say *aham brahman* (I [am] *brahman*) or make similar claims? In a rigid monotheism, to assert, “I am Allah or YHWH (Yahweh),” is not only madness but blasphemy—and those who dared to make such claims were indeed punished accordingly. Our question, however, is not “denominational” but philosophical. *Can* Man say with truth, “I can see (all) reality (or, if we prefer, God) in this flower”? Or, even worse, “I am God”?

Certainly, the human mind cannot in truth think or say it. We have defined the mind as that human faculty based on certain logical (rational) principles, but who is to say that reality should obey logical principles (principles that have been formulated by the mind itself so that it can function)? This is the vicious circle of rationalism to which I alluded earlier. An anecdote is worth quoting. A man has lost the key to his house (of knowledge) and comes across policemen while desperately looking for it under a streetlight in the darkness of the night. Asked if he is sure he lost his key there, he replies that he does not know and adds, “But there’s light here!” Are there no other lights in the street? Is his key not somewhere in the bottom of some pocket—or even at home, as recounted in the Sufi legend? Does reality have to be visible at all times to consciousness?

Yet again, the house may have a key, but must reality also have one? The mystic enters his (own) home without a key since he never locked the door.

The human mind cannot *see* the nonflower in the flower, nor anything that is not the flower; the flower, however, is, and so *is* the cloud, even when it is not

"flower" qua flower and when, in its Being (of the cloud), it is not separate from the flower—though not confused with it.

Reducing reality to pure rationality is an assumption of the mind, but not of reality. What Man cannot comprehend (because it is contradictory as such) we are supposed to call incomprehensible, but we would be transgressing the very laws of thought (thinking) if we added that it cannot *be*—unless we confessed to being disciples of Parmenides, who identified Being with Thought. Hence the challenge of mysticism.

The problem is that I cannot understand what I want while transgressing the laws of logic—even if paradoxically I can *say* what I want while *consciously* overstepping the laws of logic. Here "say" is used in its communicative sense, not just as mere "chat." The mind must obey the principle of noncontradiction and respect a certain principle of consistency. Human language, however, can express itself consciously while manifesting its visions, feelings, and other states of awareness that cannot be logically proved without falling into contradiction—although this does not imply that these are logical truths. I certainly speak the truth when I say that I dislike a person even if I fail to understand why I feel what I feel and while I have every impelling reason to feel otherwise. I can also tell a lie, but I cannot think that I speak the truth, for then it would not be an untruth. I say what I think, but I do not think what I say; I am aware of what I am saying and of the fact that what I am saying does not correspond to reality—which is the truth, in this case.

When eyewitnesses describe the ecstasies of Bengali mystic Ramakrishna Parahamṣa, we cannot deny that his visions describe a certain reality, but without the input of his disciple Vivekananda we would not dare say that the master's visions correspond to what we think of as mysticism. The human language must also have a meaning for the speaker, even if this meaning is not rational—and not only for the speaker but also for the presumed listener who is to grasp its meaning, for one does not speak on one's own. The word is relational and is therefore a human communication—that is, it has a meaning. Ergo, meaning is not just rational "significance."

The dialectical interpretation will hold that if a word or a phrase does not have rational significance, it is a contradiction in terms and, therefore, an unthinkable contradiction. Vivekananda understood Ramakrishna. The apostles at Pentecost may have sounded like so many drunken men, but they were later able to demonstrate that, far from having gone mad, they could interpret what had happened to them. They had seen a dimension of reality that cannot be traced back to rationality and were conscious of it. Here we must emphasize again the difference from, and the relation with, artistic (especially poetical) language and mystical languages. Both transcend pure rationality, but while the former deals mainly with Form and Beauty more than with Truth, the latter renounces neither and claims to reveal an aspect of reality that is not disjointed from its other dimensions—although a certain philosophy tends to find a nexus between Beauty and Truth and will claim pluralism for both.

When a certain mystical language tells us to see all things in *ātman* or God in all the parts, it tells us something that mere reason cannot comprehend, but which

is not contradictory, since God is neither “thing” nor “part.” Ontologism would be the act of explaining rationally that by seeing the flower we actually see Being; mysticism, however, is based on experience—which has no reason to be either rational or irrational.

In short, we have no rational criterion to deny that such an integral experience is possible, or to reduce Man to a logical animal. The possible and the impossible are categories of the Mind, not of Being. Experience aims at Being. We shall have occasion to say more about this experience.

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*In summary:* We have described the mystical experience as the experience that “sees,” “touches,” and “experiences” integral reality; that is to say, it is untouched by its interpretation and is tainted by the very first attempt to bring it into the light—just as a photographic negative image is deformed when we “reveal” it with a light wave that presents it in a color and a particular shape without which, however, it would not be visible.

Let us also repeat that it would have been preferable to say “the integral experience of Life,” since “reality” has excessive conceptual weight. Life would be the negative photographic image or, to put it better, the very pulsation of the original; “reality” would be the developed image—which enables us to speak of it.

## Sūtra 2: Experience Is the Conscious Touch of Reality

Experience, as such, is immediate; it does not admit intermediaries, otherwise it would not be experience but reflection. Experience is direct contact, to use a sensory metaphor. Or, as Spanish mystics would say, it is a touch, a “substantial touch” without separation between the toucher and the touched. Thus, it is an immediate contact. Strictly speaking, every touch is so, but since the currently dominant culture is a civilization based on instrumentation and intermediates, we need to explain what we mean by “immediate touch.” The word “experience” itself indicates something more than mere immediacy; it indicates com-penetration, being penetrated inside the thing itself that is being “experienced.” “Experience” derives from the Greek *περάω* (*peraō*), to go through, to enter, to penetrate, and from the Sanskrit *pi-piparmi*, to lead (hence *peritus*, *periculum*, *expertus*, *porta*, and naturally, *experimentum*, and so forth). Experience can be recognized in St. Augustine’s “interior intimo meo” (more inner than my innermost). Experience is com-penetrated with what is “experienced.” By its very nature, there is no a priori of experience within the order of consciousness. There is nothing “anterior” to the datum of consciousness except the datum itself, of which we do learn from experience. Experience is the datum, what is given. Experience is a gift—the gift of Life in our case. There is something that is given to us—and that is therefore *received*. This leads us to characterize all experience, and in particular the mystical experience, as endowed with a predominance of the

feminine principle—even though passivity is not an exclusive domain of women. The example of Śiva (passive) and Pārvatī (active) should suffice to illustrate this. What matters is that the datum is received, accepted, and “suffered,” even if it is transformed in the receiving.

The immediate consciousness of the datum does not signify knowledge derived from the donor, as a factor extrinsic to the datum itself. When philosophy, forgetful of its very name, perpetrated the schism between love and knowledge, the datum, the gift of existence in this case, manifests itself as a problem. The datum then ceases to be experience, and reason, as an intermediary, demands a donor. In general, the fact of how we can come into contact with something that is given to us constitutes a high point of modern Western philosophy: mediation (μεσιτεία, *mesiteia*)—the *Vermittlung*, which was Hegel’s torment and an issue from the moment one begins to accept the Cartesian dualism between the *res extensa* and the *res cogitans*, the “extended” versus the “thinking matter.” Here we have a dilemma that reason alone cannot solve: on the one hand, all our conscious acts must result in something immediate, primordial, so that our cognitions may rest on a *fundamentum inconcussum*—otherwise we should fall into the abyss of a never-ending process. On the other hand, just as we become aware that we are in front of something immediate, we destroy the immediacy, since being conscious of it is achieved through a process of reflection, which may not be immediate. We then need an intermediary, which does nothing but postpone the issue. The Parmenidean temptation to identify Being with Thinking is great. Thus there is no mediation, only identity. Mediation is identified with reflection, which is a Hegelian feat: “*Die Vermittlung ist nichts anders als die sich bewegende Sichselbstgleichheit, oder sie ist die Reflexion in sich selbst*” (Mediation is nothing else but dynamic self-equivalency, or reflection in itself). It is the attraction of monistic idealism felt by the mind when it is intent on grasping reality through reason. But then a serious problem arises. Wishing to avoid monism so as not to contradict common sense (which perceives differences), not distinguishing affirmation from negation, we fall into irrationalism or dialectics (*sic et non*). Dialectics is freed from contradiction (irrationalism) if it postulates a synthesis in which contradiction is overcome by virtue of the finite character of any affirmation—neither the *sic* nor the *non* being then absolute. It is an ingenious hypothesis that, however, if we are committed to keeping rational evidence as the ultimate criterion of truth, forces us to renounce Parmenidean dogma, from which the problem arose, and we are lapsing into a vicious circle: thought as self-mediation of Being. Mediation thus proves to be unnecessary at this ultimate level.

To put it briefly, if we forgo mediation and if we want to avoid monism, we plunge into total agnosticism, and we cannot reach any conclusion. Being is what one thinks it is—and no more. However, true mediation is something more than intermediation. The *advaita* intuition solves the dilemma between monism and dualism by forbearing to make any claim about rational evidence as the “ultimate” and sole criterion for truth (outside its own field) and transcends this dilemma (without negating it) through the very experience (*advaita*) that constitutes the vision at the

core of mysticism. Mystical vision reveals, in actual fact, the *reductio ad unum* error (a process of reduction to unity) as essential to the experience of reality. In order to grasp something rationally we must reduce the multiplicity of data to unity, but the field of human consciousness is much wider than that of rational consciousness. In the realization that reality is dialectically elusive we are already opening up to the awareness that reality transcends our power of rational comprehension—that is, we overcome Parmenides's dogma.

The *advaita* intuition solves the problem of mediation with a mode of thought that is not dialectical. This is why it widens the field and function of consciousness, but it does not fall into irrationalism—and besides, it distinguishes between mediator and intermediary. This latter term links two beings from without, so to speak, or finds a superior synthesis that embraces them both. Mediation, on the other hand, is an inner and constituent relationship between two poles—qua poles. A pole is not a pole without the other, so that knowledge of one pole demands knowledge of its opposite. It is impossible to know one pole without also knowing the other. But we are unable to know rationally both poles simultaneously (A and B—which is not identical to non-A). The "two" poles form precisely an a-dualistic polarity. Mediation does not unite two beings, but is the union itself, a union that does not mean unity or unification, but constituent polarity. Mediation shows that we are not dealing with two entities that subsequently become acquainted, but that the relationship itself is fundamental. This relationship, however, is not rationally intelligible in the sense that it does not allow the *reductio ad unum*, or to see both poles simultaneously. To give a Christian example, it is not that Jesus Christ is a Man who unites us with God or a God who gives a hand to humanity, but he is fully God and fully Man—not half god and half human: he is the mediator, not the intermediary.

Obviously, philosophical traditions that have not restricted a priori Man's capacity to grasp reality to reason alone have a deeper understanding of experience (*anubhava*) as the ultimate foundation of all our perception of reality. Thus, for instance, frequently occurring Vedāntic concepts such as *nirvikalpa* (*simplex apprehensio*), *aparokṣānubhūti* (immediate knowledge), *prātyakṣa* (direct perception), and *aśparśayoga* (*yoga* free of mental content, mind arrest, nonmind) are basic intuitions that can be used to restore the primeval (mystical) meaning of philosophy. Philosophy is then construed as the critical spirit of Man during his pilgrimage on earth. By "critical" we mean the conscious form, which is not necessarily or exclusively rational. Let us not forget, as some philosophical systems do, that this pilgrimage of consciousness is that of the body, the soul, and the spirit.

Philosophy is not only an *opus rationis*; it is an *opus tripartitum*, a work of the body, the soul, and the spirit. Man is a corporeal as well as rational and spiritual being. The experience of reality is *nirvikalpa*, devoid of mental construction, and thus precedes every name and form (*nāma-rūpa*). In the moment in which we use language as an instrument of the mind, we transform reality into a mental construct (*śavikalpa*). But "the *Tao* that can be named is not the *Tao*." This is like saying the *Tao* that language speaks is not the *Tao* that language reveals. It follows that there can be

no hermeneutics of mysticism as such. The hermeneutics of mysticism is simply our interpretation of mysticism. There may be a hermeneutics of mystical expressions, but not of mysticism. This fact is as humiliating and salutary for our mind as it is hazardous for our life—humiliating, because the mind cannot presume to elect itself the supreme faculty; salutary, because it restores the role of the heart; and hazardous, because we have to put our trust in something, and the oblivion of reason would be even worse. It follows that for an authentic philosophy we need education in pureness of heart, clarity of mind, and sincere love. I mention these elementary notions of other philosophies in order to highlight how much the prevailing Western philosophy has distanced itself from mysticism. We can emphasize the fact that mysticism is not rational without thereby being irrational ourselves. To call it meta-rational, even if we can cleanse the term of any other connotations, places rationality at the center of anthropology, since the fact that reason is constitutive of Man does not make it superior to body or spirit.

This detachment from complete experience on the part of a merely rational philosophy is due, at least in part, to oblivion on two levels on the part of "civilized" Man regarding both his corporeity, reduced to mere instrumentality, and the presence of the spirit confined in transcendence. This philosophy has reduced the whole human being to his or her rational nature. A distant cause of this alienating dispute may have its origin in Man's enthusiasm for his own discoveries, beginning with writing—as Pharaoh Thamus foresaw, when he was approached by the God Toth with the gift of writing (as reported by Plato in his *Phaedrus*). "Causes of falling indeed there must be" (ἀνάγκη, *anagkē*), says the Gospel. However, we must resist the temptation to take the discussion back to the dawn of history, even though the current state of humanity and the planet urges us toward considerations of this kind. It may be that only mysticism can assist us in effecting this radical change, which is imperative in our time. The fact is that, in our modern and predominantly technocratic and rational culture, both sensory and spiritual experiences have been expunged, although there are important exceptions.

We have not yet adequately dealt with the dilemma as earlier posed: Can we speak about an immediate contact without destroying its immediacy by speaking about it? Mysticism, as the very word suggests, rightly keeps its mouth closed, but it cannot and, indeed, should not eliminate thought—on pain of irrationality. Discursive thought is obviously not immediate: discourse is its "mediation," and this destroys its immediacy. But is there a form of consciousness that does not exclude immediacy, or that does not intervene between knowing and the known? To put it differently, is there or can there be a conscious, but not reflexive, form of consciousness? An intuition or a vision that cannot see itself, that cannot reflect on itself? If not, we make reflection itself immediate, that is to say, we lapse again into Hegelianism, absolute idealism.

Concretely, if experience is awareness of "touching" reality, does this consciousness not intervene between the touching and the reality? Do we not very often discover that what we believe to be unmediated touching is actually illusory? As we shall see



in *Sūtra* 7, it is not consciousness but its interpretation that destroys immediacy. The consciousness of an illusory event is just as immediate as the consciousness of a real one. Yet consciousness is not the whole of reality, even if, thanks to consciousness, that is, through its mediation, we can perceive reality and thus speak about it.

I used the term "conscious experience"—and not reflexive consciousness—because if we can *speak* as much about experience as we can about anything else, we can do it because of the consciousness we have of it. This does not mean that we should identify consciousness with intelligibility (which is rational), nor consciousness with reality. This identification, I repeat, exerts a great attraction on the human mind, since with it we can wipe the slate clean and cancel everything that disturbs a rational conception of reality. The implication, however, as we have already seen, is that we should adopt Parmenides's postulate a-critically. It is one thing to claim that Thought reveals an aspect of Being, while it is quite another to state that Thought is able to remove all the veils of Being (reality), for this amounts to saying that Being is identical with reality. A philosophical chastity—not the same thing as rational celibacy—was already talked about seven centuries ago. Meister Eckhart, in a memorable commentary on the Letter to the Romans, speaks of the triple veil of reality: "*velamen boni, velamen veri et velamen entis*" (a veil of goodness, a veil of truth and a veil of being). Not only do Goodness and Truth veil reality for us, but Being itself is also the ultimate veil of reality. If with our will we can raise the veil of Goodness and with our intelligence the veil of Truth, the third veil lacks an organ for its revelation—it is the mystery. "The Gods love obscurity," as the *Veda* say.

In this contact we identify with the whole of reality, but it is not mediated by any special faculty of ours. This is also why I use the term "integral experience," because it is untouched (*in-tangere*) and thus is in no need of any particular organ. It does not touch reality; we are reality, even if the point of tangency where we stand is dimensionless (and thus it cannot be said that there is a toucher and a touched). Most philosophical traditions have called this experience mystical, although many followers have thought of philosophy as just another specialization and have reduced knowledge to the workings of the mind, thereby interpreting in a reductionist key old familiar claims, such as, "He who knows *brahman* becomes *brahman*," or "Eternal life is to know God," and the "beatific vision" consists in this: "The ultimate identity is that which lies between knowledge and the known," and so forth. But is "knowledge" an adequate word to use in this case? This is a question we try to address later on.

This is the point where, without losing sight of tradition, we ought to make it an explicit and integral part of this commentary. This "knowledge" is not only of the mind, but it is also that of the senses and of the spirit, to which must be added that it is more (or less) pure sensory perception, epistemic knowledge or devotional sentiment. For too long, mysticism has been identified as the monopoly of privileged minds or of the "devout and spiritual," whom St. Teresa of Avila wished to get away from, since "God moves among pots and pans" as well.

If the contact were exclusively rational, if knowledge were only of the mind, the monist interpretation would be practically insurmountable: reality would be what

is knowable. Precisely because our knowledge is also corporeal, we can be aware of our *contingence*—according to the *truth* of the word itself (“*etymos*” means truth). Any human experience undoubtedly *touches* (*tangir*) reality, but it touches it at a single point: it is the tangent of our “contingence” (*cum-tangere*). The experiential touch of mysticism is immediate and divinizes us (to use the language of theism); it is “touching the real,” even if Spanish mysticism would say that it is “substantial,” but it has nothing to do with pantheism, because we touch on Infinity at a single point—dimensionless—to pursue our geometrical metaphor. The mystical experience touches on reality, albeit contingently, that is to say, tangentially. Hence, humility is a virtue connatural to mysticism.

But this is also where the necessity of avoiding a wrong interpretation of what I have just said originates. Because of the individualistic atmosphere of the contemporary predominant culture, which has raised echoes even in mystical studies, it is usual to fall into a subjectivist interpretation of experience. This individualistic experience would be what a body of recent North American literature calls “experientialism,” which consists in an interpretation of the subjective experience from within the myth of modern individualism. All experience is subjective; it belongs to the subject, but not necessarily to an individual subject—that would be “subjective experience”—and not exclusively to the subject. The experience itself links the subject and the object; it is a mediator, not an intermediary.

The mystical experience is not the private experience of an individual, though equally it cannot be defined as a “public experience.” We touch reality, and reality as such is indivisible—even as objective and subjective realities. To put it another way, the mystical experience is not *my* (individual) experience—but neither is it therefore *our* (collective) experience. It is not a private individual’s experience, even if it is a personal experience, as I explain later. Let us just say at this point that this experience, belonging as it does to the Body of reality, has cosmological repercussions that depend on how more or less profound it is, and this Body is justly named “Mystical Body” by various traditions. This is the intuition that underlies the notion of *karman* as universal solidarity, the intuition of the Buddhic nature of all sentient beings, the Christian belief in the Mystical Body of Christ or in universal redemption through the cross and the resurrection, the universal responsibility of every human being, as described in a certain literature, and so on. If the mystical experience touches reality, it is natural that it should be sensitive to the touch; it is reality itself that manifests having been touched.

This explains why many mystics withdraw into solitude: not to cut themselves off from the world, but to enter into a more intimate and profound contact with it. Solitude is not isolation. The mystic needs neither propaganda nor advertising.

This last statement is not in contradiction with what we said just before. The mystical experience is certainly an experience of the person, but it is not an individualist act. Its repercussions propagate like ripples reaching all around a lakeshore. This metaphor is to be understood as saying that the flow of waves itself is what allows new ones to form. The solitude of the solitary is relative to the community

in contrast to which he is solitary; this is why it is not isolation. Just a handful of righteous sustain humanity, Jewish mysticism holds.

We touch reality, we are aware of it; we are reality—the reality that is not made of parts. Human dignity stems from this—which is precisely what mystical experience reveals, seeing the whole of reality in every Man, in every being.

We have used the word “touch,” a sensual metaphor, but we also added “conscious,” which belongs to the vocabulary of the order of consciousness. It is a question of “jointly generating” the known on the part of the knower (according to a now controversial etymology), “*connaitre, naître ensemble*,” as Paul Valéry says. Just as we cannot call “human” a touch that is not conscious, so we cannot call “authentic” a knowledge that is sterile, that is to say, a knowledge that has not generated the known. This is suggested by the cognate relationship, or rather the identity, between Indo-European roots linking γινώσκω, *gignosko* (I know) and γίγνομαι, *gignomai* (I generate). Even more so, a *gnosis* that does not arise from the desire (love) to be generated from the unknown could not be recognized as knowledge. Hence a certain feminine character of mysticism, as we noted earlier. We know inasmuch as we are known, say the Christian Scriptures, which elsewhere specify that God loved us first. It should be obvious that knowing is not memorizing or gathering information. Perhaps it is also the task of mysticism to restore words to their full meaning. Should I have said that mysticism is the loving contact with the whole of reality? We shall explain further how there is no authentic knowledge without love. In the fifteenth century, Jean Gerson, in an echo of St. Bonaventure, defined *theologia mystica* as “*cognitio experimentalis habita de Deo per amoris unitive complexum*” (experimental knowledge of God through the embrace of unitive love).

This *sūtra* has a very important corollary, which we may introduce by turning to the historical evidence of martyrdom (this is pleonastic since μάρτυρ—*martyr*—means “witness”). One does not give one’s life away for the sake of an opinion, whereas it can be put at risk for an experience that one cannot deny, unless by lying. The historical fact of martyrdom, however, shows that, while it is possible to deny the experience of the senses by deception and that of the mind by lying, it is more difficult to deny the experience of the faith by apostasy. We are dealing with an immediate touching of reality that transcends the testimony of the senses and the intuition of the intellect. It is the vision of the third eye, which Christian tradition called *oculus fidei*, the eye of faith. Faith is not a matter of assertion. “*Fides non est de enuntiabilibus*,” as St. Thomas wrote. Faith is an experience: the unmediated vision of a reality that can be proved neither rationally or empirically but that is just as immediate as the experience of the senses or of the intellect. Let us not confuse faith, which is an experience, with belief, which is its intellectual expression.

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*In summary:* Man is a being suspended between heaven and earth. His feet touch the ground—but in becoming aware of that contact he realizes that, through his

eyesight, his touch reaches up to the sky. By being aware that he touches the ground, he also realizes that he touches heaven with a touch that is different from the sensory. What heaven and earth are, he does not know, but he is aware of his position as a mediator. That is his experience.

### Sūtra 3: Reality Is Neither Subjective nor Objective: It Is Our *Mythos*

In the interests of clarity, we have had to anticipate something of what we mean by reality. I thus refer to my earlier statements, as I would like to avoid a thorny issue and a wandering into pure intellectual lucubrations which, though important per se, are secondary to the topic at hand. I shall only mention it in passing, as I would like to use the word in the sense that is closest to the ordinary meaning, and in connection with what is relevant to our subject.

Strictly speaking, reality cannot be the subject or the predicate of any proposition. Nevertheless, we constantly commit this logical error, which goes to show that logic is transcended by human language, since we manage to understand each other. Reality is what "allows" us to find sense in both the subject and the predicate. The formula "S is P" does not express what reality *is*. The "is" of reality is neither the subject nor the predicate. It is a naked "is," so much so that it can be identified with *nothingness*—since both lack apposite attributes to distinguish them from each other: reality is not only before our eyes, it is also behind and within our eyes. *Upaniṣadic* wisdom rigorously states that it is impossible to assert that "reality *is*" (the third-person verbal form), as this is already a reification that turns it into an object. Nor can it be said, "[I] *am* reality," since reality is not purely subjective either. Who would dare say, "I am reality," or just "I am," eliminating every predicate? If we have *consciousness* of the ego that says, "I am," we have already transformed it into a predicate (I say or I think that "I am"—that is to say, I am saying something about *myself*). The word "consciousness" is used not in the moral sense but in the sense of awareness: *Bewusstsein*, *Gewahrsein*, and also of *jñāna*, *cit*, *buddhi*, and its many derivatives. Novalis's dictum when he was studying Fichte comes back to mind: "*Das Bewusstseyn ist [ . . . ] ein Bild des Seyns im Seyn*" (Consciousness is [ . . . ] an image of Being in being). But is this image similar to the shadow of Plato's cave? Only *brahman* can say *aham-brahman* (I-*brahman*): *Eheieh asher Eheieh* (I am who I am). But *brahman* does not know that it is *brahman*. Its consciousness is *Īśvara*. What the Father (in the Trinity) *is*, so is the Son. Mysticism moves in this direction.

We may speak about all this, but reality eludes the *logos*; and the more the *logos* becomes aware, the more reality eludes it—thus the *logos* also realizes the fact that reality cannot be reached. We cannot know reality as such, since reality is not an object (of knowledge) and it is reality that allows us to be conscious of what the *logos* shows to our very consciousness. We are aware of the various beings that present to our consciousness and to which we attribute different degrees of reality, according to our mental criteria. Thus, I do not assign the same degree of reality to the horse I

see, to the pain I feel, to my thoughts, or to the sense of foreboding that takes hold of me. These degrees of reality are like background music sinking in while we are engaged in some other activity. If we pay attention to it we are distracted, but if it is turned off we feel something is missing. It is as if the music gives shape to our activity. We perceive the various beings as real (in their varying degrees), as belonging to the Being of which we can only be aware in the various beings (entities). However, indirectly we are conscious of it—as with the music.

We shall not deal here with the major problems of ontology, ontologism, onto-theology, or with the ontological difference. We may just say that all these philosophical questions presuppose that, together with rational thinking on entities, we are conscious of a reality (which for the most part would be called Being) that transcends our reason although it does not negate it, which would be irrational. There is “something” beyond the *logos*—irrespective of the “there is” (existence?) problem.

If reality eludes the *logos*, how can we still speak about it? We can speak of it because the Word is “someone’s” word and it says “something”—anthropomorphically speaking. In philosophical parlance, the Word is relational. The Word is such because it has an Origin and is inhabited by the Spirit, in theological terms. Put in simpler terms, the Word is not alone. In our sublunary world, the word is inseparable from the *mythos*—this “wind” that blows where, when, and how it will. Every word is a word within a *mythos*, which is its horizon. It is only mythically that we can speak of reality. The *logos* is male; the *mythos* is female. Both are complementary—and sometimes also supplementary. Some cultures are prevalently mythical, others strongly logical, even if there is no *logos* without *mythos* and no *mythos* without *logos*. Monism aims to eliminate the *mythos*, and where this is not possible equates both: dualism contrasts them at every level; a-dualism (*advaita*, the Trinity, the game, yin and yang) joins them together—the *mysterium conjunctionis*, as Carl Jung would say, *maithuna* according to the *Tantra*, or *hieros gamos*, as Greek writers have it. Monism postulates *unity*; dualism tends toward *union*; a-dualism aspires to *harmony*.

The experience of harmony is a primordial experience that cannot be reduced to unity and multiplicity. In order to perceive harmony, pure unity is not needed and mere diversity is not enough. Something else is needed; mere rational thinking is not sufficient. Rational thinking encompasses unity and attempts to reduce multiplicity to a higher unity through dialectics, moving from a concept A to a concept non-A to seek a synthesis (of multiplicity). Rational intellection applied to a symphony may fascinate us because of the symphonic technique (which is not exempt from virtuosity), but it is not the same thing as the experience of harmony. This requires the experience of rhythm, which is neither the repetition of an identical movement nor its negation. Our atrophied artistic culture makes it harder for us to realize that neither rhythm nor harmony can be reduced to something external; neither can be perceived without our participation, without us “becoming part” of them and without our complete identifying with them. The second “movement” of rhythm repeats the first but is not identical to it, coming in second place as it does. We are a part; we “participate,” but we are not the whole.

Without grasping the whole we cannot be aware of harmony, although at the same time harmony presupposes that we are aware of the parts that form a harmonic whole: we are not aware of the parts per se but as parts of the whole (subjective genitive).

The term "participation" has acquired a full identity in a certain philosophy, but it can easily mislead us if interpreted according to the specialized patterns of thinking that we have just criticized. The participative knowledge we refer to is not the knowledge of one part of reality, but the consciousness of all reality from a concrete perspective. An a-dualistic consciousness is needed that unites us at the same time as it keeps us at a distance. It is the consciousness of relation as such and not that of entities that relate to each other—relation "in itself," one could paradoxically say.

Consciousness of this radical relativity (*pratītyasamutpāda*) is one of the basic intuitions of Buddhism, which for this reason removed substance from entities (*anātmavāda*) so that they do not distract us from the mystical vision—that is to say, the complete vision—of reality.

This *participative consciousness* has a name just as polysemic as the other terms we have been using. That name is *love*, and this love is the natural companion of knowledge. The deadly divorce is the divorce of knowledge and love. When mysticism speaks of knowledge, it is of knowledge filled with love, and when it sings of love, it is of a knowledge-filled love. The classification between mysticisms of being or knowledge and mysticisms of affection or of love is the handiwork of the knife of the dialectical mind, which confuses the autopsy of a corpse with the auscultation of a living being—which does not prevent the existence of a predominantly cognitive mysticism and of another type that is mainly love-related. This division, however, is not a mystical classification but rather a merely rational one—not that this deprives it of its heuristic value. Mystical consciousness is a loving consciousness. It may be that one of the functions of contemporary mysticism is to reestablish the primordial embrace between knowledge and love. What prevents us from coming out of ourselves is the ultimate characteristic of love as a cosmic and vital force. If objectivity is a characteristic of reality, love tends toward ontological realism. One does not love a ghost.

This is one of the strong points of monotheism: it provides some kind of answer to the problem of objectivity and subjectivity. On the one hand, it presupposes that reality is subjective. God is the absolute Subject, and there is nothing outside him. The world is an idea of God. On the other hand, reality is also objective, since creation is real and concrete; the divine idea is embodied, but the world's objectivity is derived, coming from a subjectivity. Reality is God, but the world is also real—so monotheism asserts. Are there two realities then? Dualism can only be overcome through a-dualistic thought. Reality is neither one nor two. God and the world are neither one nor two. In this consists the weakness of monotheism, if it wants to uphold the idea that God is the sole Being (monism) and that creation, therefore, is ultimately not real—not as real as God. This would be the proper place of the Trinity, which requires an a-dualistic way of thinking

to avoid the fall into irrationalism. This is the cosmotheandric vision of which we shall speak again later.

To ask what reality is represents one way of framing the fundamental question of philosophy. The concepts of subjectivity and objectivity, for the very reason that they are correlative, cannot be rendered absolute. However, if we do not go beyond an epistemological framework, we can only investigate one object (reality), leaving ourselves out, or dissolving the object into the subject, which fails to save us from solipsism (*solum ipse*, "myself alone"). We cannot ask what reality is; we presuppose it already in the shaping of the question: we formulate it from the *mythos*. That is to say, we take reality for granted in our inquiry about it—a characteristic, thus, of the *mythos*, as we shall see in the next *sūtra*.

Reality is not within the grasp of the *logos*, as I have said, given that we already presuppose reality by thinking about it or negating it. In any case, both what we assert and what we deny is a presupposition (*pre-sub-positum*) of the assertion or the denial of "something." This underlying "something" (which is certainly not a thing or "something," but we have no other word for it) is the *mythos* as the backdrop of the *logos* and allows it precisely to say "something."

But is reality this "something"? I would not venture such an affirmation, since it would make reality appear more like a postulate than a presupposition or, as we shall see, our plausibility horizon, the *mythos*.

By asserting reality as our *mythos*, we say that reality is our fundamental *presupposition*, which gives meaning to the question about reality itself. Therefore, we cannot define reality, since it is the *mythos* that delimits the limits of the question.

So, this ambiguity of the *mythos* is also a moral one. Here we touch on a central issue in comparative philosophy, which is even more sharply evident in our problem of mysticism. The following remarks can be made to synthesize and simplify the issue.

This centrifugal dynamism of Man that we have defined as love can also go by another name: *hatred*. Their relationship is not a dialectical one: hatred is not the contradiction of love; it is not nonlove. Hatred is its contrary; love taking the opposite direction—*amor curvus*, the Scholastics used to call it. At this level, love and hate are not two ethical categories but directly anthropological and indirectly ontological ones.

This observation is all the more important since monotheistic religions have ontologized ethics, as we shall continue to repeat: God is the absolute Good; Being is at the same time "What Must Be." What actually Is is what has to be, what Must-Be. We would find ourselves in very different circumstances if comparative studies on mysticism had taken into account these different cosmovisions. But something else bears on our problem: mysticism is not committed to being ethically "good." Mystical forms of fanaticism do exist. Mysticism is not exempt from dangers, like reality as a whole. The symbolisms of hell, of the annihilation of Being and of evil, are not meaningless symbols. In fact, the mystic is not an ingenuous optimist. He knows that the experience of Life is not a mere automatism. But this is an *excursus* in which we should not indulge too long.

In any case, our problem is this: What is it that “sees,” “touches,” “intuits,” and “experiences” the mystical experience? Our answer has clearly been: what “sees” is the *totum in parte*, the whole in a concrete part of reality. Reality, however, is not a crate more or less filled with parts: What is this *totum*, this ὅλον (*holon*), this *sarva*? The most plausible answer can only be a tautology, even though the names may be quite different: the Whole, God, Nothingness, Being, even if it appears under the guise of Goodness, Beauty, Life, Justice, Love, or any other name—some would even dare to include Evil. However, any word we use has to be clarified and, in dialogue, justified. This is why, to repeat, the mystic prefers to remain silent or, at any rate, to listen in silence and, if forced to speak, will choose, if at all possible, the language of the person with whom he is speaking.

Consciousness of the *totum* is not the knowledge of all its parts or that of their sum. It is not an analytical and rational vision, but neither is it a vague or abstract consciousness, since mystical consciousness is concrete and sees the “whole” in the concrete, as we said with the example of the flower. It is the vision of the “third eye,” which is not only “eye” but also “third,” resting as it does on the first two, the sensory and the mental.

By affirming that reality becomes manifest to us in the form of a *mythos*, we are saying that the mystical experience sees the concrete that incarnates the universal as a real epiphany of the Whole. Mysticism is not an ideology, although every mystic defends his own particular language.

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*In summary:* Reality is the substrate on which we rest in order to say anything about it. It follows that we can neither objectify nor subjectify it. It is the given—what is given to us, our starting point that we have called *mythos*. The *logos*, however, does not give up and urges us on to say something on the *mythos* itself.

The intermediary step that lets us see the interconnection between *logos* and *mythos* still has to be explained.

#### **Sūtra 4: The *Mythos* Is the Ultimate Horizon of Presence, the First Step of Consciousness**

A flagrant example of the colonialist *mythos*, which is still alive, is the belief that the so-called modern, predominantly scientific culture is neutral and universal. The essence of colonialism is monoculturalism—other cultures are reduced to “folklore” or later dubbed “underdeveloped,” “developing,” or even worse, “cultures of emerging nations,” thereby demonstrating more and more the imposition of a single model—so powerful that only a minority of dissenting voices are allowed to be heard. This observation is not an artificial parenthesis, as it is only through a mystical vision that the dilemma before us—acceptance of techno-scientific culture or barbarism—can be solved. What I mean by “monoculturalism” is the belief that



a single culture (with its accidental variants) is capable of encompassing the totality of the human condition.

The loss of the mystical sense of existence is manifest in the monocultural *mythos* prevailing in most of the Western world, which appears content to accept that religiosity (I am not speaking of the individualized forms of religionism that are the triggering causes of the problem) is a private matter, whereas what science teaches is neutral and universal—as the supporters of secular fundamentalism maintain.

Another example would be the current theological debate on what is usually called “multiple religious belonging,” according to which it is possible to be simultaneously Christian, Hindū, and Buddhist, shall we say, since the mythical presupposition is that religions are systems of beliefs linked to particular organizations. From the perspective of mysticism, the question appears to be badly framed. The mystical experience, which is the experience of faith, cannot be classified into sociological compartments.

I am not a Christian, a Jew or a Muslim.  
I belong neither to the East nor to the West ...

... declaimed the great mystic ʿĠālāl al-Dīn Rūmī in the thirteenth century. To quote another Muslim who preceded and outlived Rūmī, Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-ʿArabi,

The Almighty, Omnipresent God is not incarnate  
(Imprisoned) in any creed or religion,  
For everywhere you turn, there is the face of God.

These two texts are expressed by one of the most officially rigid religions, which demonstrates how a deeper study of personal faith, albeit starting from concrete beliefs, overcomes this pseudo-problem, provided we do not confuse religion and ideology. Mysticism frees us from that approach.

A mystical vision is needed, not “cosmetic” reforms or “morality jabs,” which serve only to prolong the agony of a system under a death sentence—having excluded the “solution” of violence, which only triggers a counterreaction that, as well as eliminating the violent, legitimizes repression and reinforces the “system.” As we shall say again, mysticism is politically and sociologically “dangerous” for the champions of the present status quo, which appears content with a bipartite anthropology that sees Man as a mere “rational animal.”

It is worth noting that when speaking of the *mythoi* of other peoples, the modern *mythos* of reason and science is ignored. Here, too, another side effect of the study of mysticism could be mentioned: mysticism frees us from the monolithic “modern” cosmovision, since it helps us discover our *mythos* and to become aware that we, too, are as contingent as any other culture. It is not just others who speak with an accent. This observation can also be applied to ourselves, but without confusing

the relativity (of all our assertions) with relativism (which makes them trivial). This does not preclude, once a certain perspective is (more or less mythically) accepted, our speaking in terms of superior and inferior cultures, and also of a certain cultural progress—albeit neither homogeneous nor linear and always relative.

The *mythos* is like a picture frame in which we place everything that we become conscious of, thanks to our *logos*. What we believe in, without feeling the need to ask ourselves why this is so, is what constitutes the *mythos* on which we rely. Our belief in it is so strong that we do not even know that we believe in it. We take it for granted, as obvious and self-evident; our mind is compliant—it is serene and asks for nothing more. We can be aware of our *mythos*, but we cannot ask ourselves whether we are, since we are conscious of being aware of it—although we can ask ourselves why that is. The question itself, however, reminds us that we are looking for something we can trust more than what we already trust—and this can go on ad infinitum until we reach another *mythos*. This means that the initial *mythos* from which we start begins to crumble by the intromission of *logos*. However, the *logos* proceeds until it finds another *mythos* that no longer poses the question. At every step of demythologization taken by the *logos*, another mythologization follows, which the *logos* (mythically) accepts. Modern science has elegantly solved the problem by operating a semantic shift: it calls *mythoi* “postulates”—and a certain sort of philosophy calls them “principles” (evident, pragmatic, necessary . . .). Hence, the crowning of the deductive method as supreme is only a short step away. Philosophy, then, turns itself into algebra. In other words, what we are saying is that we cannot fossilize reality, that Being (and every being) is a verb form and not just a substantive. “Everything is in flux,” as Heraclitus said. Years ago I introduced the notion of *Ummythologisierung* (remythologization) in opposition to Bultmann’s *Entmythologisierung* (demythologization)—although it was in a different direction from his theological notions.

When, with the light of the *logos*, we dispel the obscurity of the *mythos*, the latter withdraws and shifts to another position where the *logos* does not yet shine and questions something else. “His covering he made the darkness,” sings a Hebrew psalm, echoing a verse already quoted from the *Vedas*. The *logos* is light, but it is the obscurity of the *mythos* that allows the rays of light to shine. Were it not for the *mythos*, we would endlessly investigate and never reach any rational conclusion. When Descartes asked himself whether rational evidence was not a delusion, he had to resort to the necessity of God as undisputed *mythos*, which would not deceive him and thus allowed him to *believe* in reason.

We know that we must stop somewhere (ἀνάγκη στήναι, *anagkē stēnai*, the Greeks used to say), but we cannot be aware of this ultimate foundation in the same way that we are aware of other things. On the contrary, we could go on investigating without reaching any definite end. We believe in reason because reason itself tells us so. We are not conscious of it in a reflexive way. The *mythos* is the first rung of consciousness on which to base all our subsequent steps. We could also have said that it is its last stage, since our intellectual activity halts within it. God is the Origin

(Father) of light, says Christian Scripture; it is an affirmation that St. Bonaventure and the Arab philosophers make explicit in masterly fashion: God is the first presupposition of intelligence, the primordial *mythos*.

The major challenge of mysticism is that it dares bring into question this presupposition, and unlike certain philosophers and modern science, it remains unconvinced by the pragmatic argument that in this way the system is coherent. If mysticism speaks of God, it does not show him as the sole presupposition for consistency; it shows him as an ultimate experience. What theistic mysticism calls "God" is given to us in experience, not as a principle that must be accepted nor as the result of any demonstration. An a-theistic mysticism can be as authentic as any other. Mysticism appeals to experience and not to the pragmatic rationality of authority, custom, consistency, or order—hence the provocative (and dangerous) freedom of the mystic added to the fact that symbols such as nonknowledge, nothingness, and the void are familiar to him. This first experience is often called "consciousness," even if it lacks an object (as we shall see later on). "*Ens autem et essentia sunt quae primo intellectu concipiuntur*" (Being and essence are what is first apprehended by the intellect), as St. Thomas Aquinas writes at the beginning of his *De ente et essentia*, quoting Abū Ali al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), and also taking for granted that reality is conceived by the intellect, though without specifying whether the light of intellect embraces all reality—unless this should be viewed as a postulate.<sup>1</sup> We could agree that being, including Being, is what is first *conceived* by the intellect. What is conceived is Being, but for the conception to be real it must be of something that conception conceives as Being per se. Being would thus be the first fruit of Consciousness. It follows that Being cannot free itself from Consciousness. However, if we do not identify them (the great temptation of idealism), the "quid" that Consciousness conceives (as Being) would be "prior to" the Being that Consciousness conceives; it would be the Origin (the Father) of Being—inseparable from Being, since we cannot separate them, but not identical with Being, since it is its Source. Incidentally, we can remark here that this intuition appears to be what many monotheistic mystics babble about when they hint of "something" that is "prior to" creation and also of "something" prior to the traditional God, or what many Asian mystics refer to when they speak of the void (*jūnyatā*) as being "prior to" Being—but we must not lose the thread of the argument.

At any rate, consciousness is the place where something becomes present to us. But then, what is this presence? The most common thing nowadays is to call this evidence, because when we realize that something is present to our consciousness it is because we can see it, and seeing it (evidence), we believe we can understand it, all too frequently confusing evidence with intelligibility and the latter with rationality. There is also, however, sensory evidence. The area of a triangle inscribed within a circle is inferior to the area of the circle, which seems immediately evident. There is also undoubtedly rational evidence. The experience of the *cogito*, of the "I think,"

<sup>1</sup> Let us not forget, light itself is invisible. Between the sun's light and the earth are the shadows. Light allows vision when it encounters an opaque body. It is the beam of darkness of which mysticism speaks.

could be an example. Without entering into complex philosophical disquisitions—Western or Eastern—we could simply state that the common aspect of any form of intelligibility is the immediate presence (of the intelligible) within our consciousness, in such a way that any doubt about the presence may be excluded—which does not imply the interpretation of what it *is* that presents to our consciousness. But there is also a presentiality that is not directly intelligible, an acoustic evidence, so to speak. We are conscious that something is present in our spirit and that it does not require interpretation; it is not intelligible to us. We accept it as a given, without discussion, and its resistance to interpretation does not present a problem for us unless someone asks. This presentiality does not demand intelligibility—it does not require us to penetrate within what presents (*intus-legere*), but only that we become aware of its simple presence (*inter-legere*). This awareness of a presence as presence—and not as intelligible (being transparent, so to speak)—would be the opaque presence of the mere existence of “something” that is simply there without knowing what it *is*. This is the *mythos*. The *mythos* does not interpret; the *mythos* believes in what presents to it. This is why we have said that the *mythos* is the simple horizon against which such presentiality becomes conscious for us.

Man can, therefore, verbalize everything that arrives upon his consciousness. Man is essentially a *Homo loquens*, a speaking being, which implies being conscious of what one says. Parrots do not speak and neither do other animals. Language is more than an acoustic system of signs or a simple communication medium; language becomes language when there is the consciousness of *what* it is that we are saying (even without *understanding* it), when the telling is communication of thought and when there is a *you*, real or virtual, to listen to us, besides the *material means* whereby language is language and not an abstraction. I have called this *sacra verbi quaternitas*, the sacred quaternity of the word: the speaker, the listener, something, through a *sensory means*. Consciousness is broader than comprehension. I cannot understand something that I do not understand, but I can be conscious of the fact that I do not understand it.

This is why the language of the *mythos* is narrative. It is not limited to concepts and allows ample margins for interpretation on the part of the *logos*. The *mythos* is expressed in the narration—as the word itself suggests. The *mythos-legein*, the narrative of the *mythos*, is not mythology (in the modern sense of wanting to explain the *mythos* with the *logos*). Mythology destroys the *mythos*. This is why we make “mythology” from the myths of other cultures—and why we need others to discover our own *mythos*. Man is a dialogical—as well as dialectical—being. Mysticism is not solipsism—as we have already said and as we shall see again later. The flight of the one to the one (φύγη μόνου πρὸς μόνον, *phygē monou pros monon*) with which Plotinus closes his inspired work can be an aberration if we overlook the fact that it is the *πρὸς* that breaks up the solitude of both terms. Indeed, in one of the preceding Enneads the same expression is used of prayer (oration)—that is, of relation.

We have described the *mythos* as the ultimate horizon of presentiality embracing more than mere intelligibility. We cannot reduce presence to intelligibility, or the latter to rational evidence. The *mythos* as *horizon of presentiality* requires no further investigation on our part. It leaves us content and satisfied, we see it present, without adding anything; we take it as given. The whole has not yet been divorced from reflection. What the mind cannot grasp rationally can enter in its entirety into the field of our consciousness.

The movement of the spirit with which we accept the *mythos* is not pure rationality but something that goes much deeper, which convinces us that this is so, mirroring a truth that is not logical but, precisely, mythical. We find support in the *mythos* and ask for no more, as in the famous dialogue between the sage Yājñavalkya and his no less intelligent consort who asked too many questions—as narrated in one of the *Upaniṣads*. The point is not to suppress the question but to make a simple statement of fact—the scholastic *apprehensio*. St. Augustine cleverly expressed it as “*silentium veritatis*.” Strictly speaking, we cannot understand the *mythos*, but we accept it and unconsciously lean on it. We have already seen that the field of consciousness is much broader than that of rational knowledge. There is an element of trust within our spirit that is not reducible to rationalization but which, nevertheless, is not opposed to reason. This trust in the *mythos* is the “*aporia*” described by Plotinus when he states in the last *Ennead* that “consciousness (σύνεσις, *synesis*) of Him is reached neither by science (ἐπιστήμη, *epistēmē*) nor by thought (νοητά, *noēta*), but by virtue of a presence (κατὰ παρουσίαν, *kata parousian*) which is far superior to science (ἐπιστήμη, *epistēmē*).” Mysticism is the pure irruption of this presence. It is highly significant and a sign of the gradual loss of the meaning of mysticism that the *παρουσία* (*parousia*, presence) of the Gospels was translated by the Latin culture as *adventus* (advent or coming)—thus placing linear history at the apex of the mystical experience of temporality.

The *mythos* is not irrational, but its boundaries lie beyond strict rationality; it cannot be proved, which would be tantamount to founding it in reason, but it can be presented as such and it can be demonstrated that it is not necessarily contrary to reason. Such were the misunderstood “proofs” of the existence of God, since the only thing that they were trying to demonstrate was that a belief in God was not contrary to reason. Wishing to prove the existence of God by reason would be pure rationalism. It would then be reason that justified the existence of God.

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*In summary:* Man is a conscious being; he realizes there is something mysterious that he calls reality, but he realizes that it all depends on what presents to his consciousness. This consciousness of Man relies upon itself; it records what is presented to it and it understands only a few of these presences, while others are not understood. Its ultimate aspiration is what is presented to it. This ultimate aspiration is what it accepts as present. This is its *mythos*.

### **Sūtra 5: Consciousness Is Consciousness of Things, of Itself, of Abstractions or Pure Consciousness**

Here, too, words have different senses, above and beyond the aforementioned moral consciousness. In its psychological, gnoseological, and metaphysical sense, the general notion of consciousness refers to the mysterious power of the human spirit to “realize,” to perceive, or to recognize an object, a situation, or a formality—or, more academically speaking, an intentionality. There is no philosopher who has not meditated on the notion of consciousness, since philosophy itself is an act that is critically aware of the content of consciousness.

Consciousness, as its name in fact suggests, is a science, a knowledge that accompanies science in the very act of knowing. Consciousness is a shared science. The accompanying party is known as the object, and the object shares consciousness with the subject. That is why consciousness (of a subject) tends to be *of* something (the object). We are conscious of something, and it appears that this something is necessary for there to be consciousness. This something, the content of consciousness and intimately linked to it, may be things, events, emotions, or notions of different kinds. When we have a “clear and distinct” consciousness of this something, we say that we have a rational knowledge of it—although there is not universal agreement over the use of this term, in that we also speak about a certain less clear knowledge of things and also of forgotten or latent knowledge that forms the magma of the subconscious or the unconscious state. We are aware that there is (or that there may be) something (still) within us that is buried deep within our consciousness. The nature of this something may seem vague to us, but the existence of something unknown is a kind of knowledge, even if the content of the something is not clear to us. This leads us to make a distinction between consciousness as the container and consciousness as the content. An animal knows; it knows the content of its consciousness, but it is possible that it does not know itself as the container—without entering into the fascinating subject of the consciousness of animals and broadening the theme even further to the “knowledge” of plants and things. We do not have the words for that, but let us restrict ourselves to the human being.

Within consciousness as content, we have to include unconscious or subconscious contents of consciousness, as well as potential ones. Since Leibniz, Schopenhauer, and Bergson, to name just a few, we have recognized the existence of unconscious factors that influence consciousness. But it is principally since Freud and Jung that theories about the unconscious have proliferated and developed. We must, therefore, underline the importance of psychic processes in every epistemological act, whether they are conscious or unconscious. However, what interests us here is consciousness in terms of what it contains, although in order to know that we must not overlook the conscious or unconscious processes that influence our knowledge of it. All the same, this does not detract from the level at which we are pitching our reflection, which remains valid even in the light of the contributions of these and many other authors. For several years now we have had a *Journal of Consciousness Studies* (although

its slant is more scientific than philosophical), in addition to many other journals and publications on knowledge.

Man has reflexive consciousness—that is to say, he has a knowing that is concomitant with his knowing. In other words, Man is a being who knows and is conscious of his knowledge and of his self-knowledge. Therefore there are at least three classes of consciousness that we can distinguish, although we cannot always separate them: (1) knowledge of things and of their relations, (2) knowledge of ourselves, and (3) knowledge of our own knowledge (knowing that we know). In all three cases it is knowledge *of*—as postulated by Husserl. Is there anything else? Is there a pure consciousness? This question is fundamental for giving an account of mysticism.

The knowledge of things is reduced to the knowledge of those “things” that have been transformed into objects of consciousness. This was a major philosophical issue for centuries: the relationship between objects of consciousness and the world (real or ideal) from which they came. Here it will suffice to note the issue.

Generally we speak of self-consciousness when the *autos* (self) is split into subject and object. To put it in grammatical terms, we could say that one knows *oneself*, but one does not know that self’s *I*. The *I* (of self) knows the *self* (of self), inasmuch as knowledge modifies what is known; the “me” that I know is not identical to the “I” that knows. The great wisdom of gnostic mysticism and mysticism of Being is summed up in the famous phrase of the Sybil in Delphi (we have mentioned it already and will do so again): “Know thyself.” Self-knowledge is the essential characteristic of Man, according to many anthropologies. In general, though, the *autos* is an *auton*, and the *I* remains in the shadows from where the *me* emerges.

Moreover, perhaps the *autos*, the *I*, is not an individual at all, but a relationship. There is no *I* without a *you*, which is not other (*aliud*), but the other part of the same *I* (*alter*). “Love your neighbor as yourself” does not mean love him as *another* self, but as part of yourself: love him as a *you*, that is, not other; once again, this is *advaita*.

Some traditions say that perfect self-knowledge is “realization” or identification with the divine *I*—although others will add that the absolute Knower cannot remain intact as Knower if it becomes the Known. This would be the place of *advaita*, the Trinity, the *docta ignorantia*, the cloud of unknowing, and the many claims of the *Upaniṣads* when they assert that *brahman* “is unknown [*avijñātam*] by those who know it, and known [*avijñātam*] by those who do not know it”; the *tao* when known as such is not the *tao*, and so forth. For this reason the mystical experience is more than simple knowing. There is more in Being than in Knowing. Once again Parmenides casts a long shadow over certain forms of Western thought. Thought does not exhaust Being.

It is a commonplace to assert that the language of mysticism is paradoxical. But we would do well to remember that paradox does not mean contradiction. To take an already quoted phrase from the *Kena-upaniṣad*, it would be a contradiction to assert that it is known and unknown at the same time (and in the same way). However, the text says that those who know (*brahman*) do not know it, because *brahman* is beyond knowledge or, as we have already said, knowledge does not exhaust Being.

As we shall see again later, recalling Plotinus's words, pure presence transcends both conscience and science—it is immediate; it is experience.

This brings us to qualify Husserl's claim that all consciousness is *consciousness of*, and to assert that pure consciousness, as a pure experience, is not conscious of itself. But then can this pure consciousness still be called "consciousness"? The question is central and offers the key to a more complete understanding of our age, in which we cannot be content with living within our various provincialisms. In other times the parish was the universal symbol of the concrete and the province of the particular, whereas now we have lost the parochial symbolism that once united us with heaven without boundaries (provinces), and without uprooting us from our concrete earth. But let us come back to the subject at hand.

Some philosophies do in fact claim that there is a consciousness that is neither of things nor of the fact that one knows (which would be reflexive consciousness), nor indeed of itself, which would be consciousness *of* the objectivized subject (object consciousness); it is not consciousness *of*, but pure consciousness—without the *of* as qualifier. And if we were to insist, as the West seems to do, that all consciousness is consciousness *of*, then a good part of the East would say that in this case it is consciousness *of nothing*, not even of itself. It is not, therefore, the *noēsis noēseōs* (reflexive knowledge of knowledge) of Aristotle, but pure vacuity, simple consciousness devoid of contents, including of itself (as self-consciousness). As *vedānta* scholarship says, the *brahman* is not conscious of being *brahman*. His consciousness is *Īśvara*, not less than *brahman*, but distinct from it. This consciousness is not distinguished from the objects of which it is conscious, nor from the subject that owns it. We are now approaching mysticism. Consciousness without intermediaries cannot even consider itself as an intermediary: it is pure presence—of which, paradoxically, I am conscious only when it is absent, after it has passed. This distinction saves us from monism without falling into dualism, just as Christ in the Trinity saves us from monotheism without falling into polytheism.

This pure presence, devoid of everything, is pure experience. It is the ecstatic experience, which has absolutely nothing to do with psychological ecstasy. For many, mysticism consists exactly of this pure experience. We call it "ecstatic" because it does not turn back on itself, not because it is a kind of unconscious rapture; this is worth repeating because the ambivalence of the word "ecstasy" has caused much confusion. As we have already suggested, the confusion arises from having limited mysticism to what is specifically and restrictively mystical. The predominantly Western mind, sensitive to differences, has defined as mysticism this specific difference that distinguishes it—that is, what differentiates it from everything else. The predominantly Eastern mind, on the other hand, prefers to define mysticism not by what is specifically distinctive, but by what is generically but "essentially" human—that is, what cannot be separated from all else that is human as well. Clearly, therefore, its essence is not the specific difference, as we said in the introduction. This does not mean we cannot make distinctions or indeed, by way of reaction, deny the reality of the world.



Let us take an example. We call knowledge the presence of an object in our consciousness. This presence is not the appearance of an image on our cognitive retina but its penetration inside. This is how one becomes, or comes to be what he truly knows. An epistemology that is divorced from its ontology may be *episteme* but it is not *gnosis*. This *gnosis* is the essence of knowledge, but it is a generic, not specific, essence. There are, in fact, various classes of knowledge; they are all knowledge—and thus we come back to a certain epistemology. Knowledge can be sensory, intellectual, or spiritual—although we could also speak of knowledge that is artistic, intuitive, rational, and so forth. Correspondingly, something in all knowledge is mystical. The reduction of mysticism to its specific difference—that is, to the vision of the third dimension of reality that can be seen only through the third eye (which we shall explain further)—has led to the belief that mysticism is, at best, a specialty that is the reserve of a few experts or select souls—the few who have had this super-rational experience. It is interesting to recall that Gregory of Nyssa refers to the escape from the merely intellectual state as *extasis* (ἐκ-στάσις) and not as rapture (ἄρπαγή, *harpagē*, rape or pillage) outside the sensory world, probably recalling the word of Christ when he gives thanks to the Father for revealing his fundamental message to mere children and not to the “clever.” In any case, this experience is in continual flux; it is ineffable and can only be spoken about in the past. It is a memory, albeit one that is expressed linguistically through the *logos*. This *logos* on the experience is no longer the experience itself, but only the word on it. Certainly, the *logos* is always a *logos* of something, but consciousness is more than *logos*.

Modern specialization, in its noble quest for clear and distinct ideas, has succumbed to the temptation of dividing reality to make it more manageable and easy to control. Memory, which cannot be overlooked, presents us with what is remembered, but does not make it real outside itself. Memory is of the past, but it is present memory. “Things” come back to us as present, and may be very present when the memory is fresh, but only after coming back into being (in the present). Re-call means putting things back in our heart as real. This is another example of the fact that we cannot separate knowledge from love—either positively or negatively. Both knowledge and love participate in recall. A common observation is that we record little of what has had little impact on our heart, as perhaps the word itself suggests.

Now we shall speak about the memory of our mystical experience, when it is already in the past. God is seen only from behind, according to the mystical commentary on a biblical phrase. But we speak of him as of something ineffable. How, then, shall we speak of him? The question would be unanswerable, were it not for three reasons. First, because Man is not only *logos* but also *pneuma*, as we have already said, which is what enables us to be conscious of what cannot be spoken of or understood. “My words *are* spirit,” said Christ. Second, because by “mysticism” we mean the complete vision of reality (including both sensory and mental experience) and not only the experience seen with the “mystical eye,” we can thus speak of what we mean using reason, but we perceive with the body and the spirit.

The third reason is rather complex and proves that speaking of the ineffable is not irrational. In reality, if we speak of what is recognized as ineffable, and at least some (very wisely) claim to be conscious of what they are speaking about, then reason will *deduce* that there is still something that cannot be reduced to language. The recognition of this something, though, is not the mystical experience itself, but its translation into the rational *noēma*. At this point we speak of the "mystical phenomenon" related to what I have called the *pisteuma* (from *pistis*, faith). This means what the believer "sees" in the experience—which is not what the outside observer *deduces* from the manifestation of the mystic, translating it into its *noēma*. We should remember again what we said regarding the *fides oculata*. The translation of an experience is not the same as the experience itself, and neither is the *pisteuma* reducible to the *noēma*. There are no vicarious experiences. Experience is eminently personal—which does not mean individualistic. It can be the object of communication—or, better, contagion—but it needs to be lived.

The *noēma* is a pure concept, without claims to validity outside the field of consciousness in which it is born; it is a formal entity of which we can have a clear and distinct awareness. In fact, a large part of contemporary philosophy is an algebra of concepts that achieves great clarity in the philosophical discussions with phenomenology—which converts concepts into *noēmata*. The *noēma* is presented directly to consciousness, and in this sense we can speak of an intellectual experience. The mystical experience, however, is not content with phenomenological reduction and has a claim to truth that always appears scandalous to traditional phenomenology—precisely because it cannot be reduced to it.

Undoubtedly phenomenology is very useful for avoiding the extreme trap of irrationalism and, above all, for recognizing pseudo-mysticism. It is said that a deaf person can have a clearer perception of the rhythmic movements of actors, whose details will escape those who are too taken by the music—although, on the other hand, the *noēma* of a deaf person cannot replace the other *noēma* of the listener, who must have very attentive eyes and ears.

The mystic recalls having had an empty consciousness by way of an experience that cannot be explained by the experience of the *noēma*. This is why the mystic is instinctively reluctant to describe his own experiences. He realizes that, if he were to describe what he has experienced, the outside observer would convert his *pisteumata* into *noēmata*, and thereby distort them. It is not possible to interpret the *pisteuma*, what the mystic believes ("sees"), if the observer sees only the *noēma* and not what the mystic is trying to describe. The *pisteuma* is like the ballet with its musical enchantment, whereas the *noēma* is the rhythmic movement or just the music.

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*In summary:* We have no other way to express ourselves except by appealing to consciousness, which is what allows human communication. What we commonly call "consciousness" is certainly complex and polyvalent. The challenge of mystical

experience is to state that there is a component of consciousness that transcends reason and that is present, albeit too often latently, in every act of consciousness.

We cannot speak of ineffable experience using rational reason, but it is not impossible to be aware of it and, therefore, to speak of it. It is not impossible to sing it, as an artist or a poet might say. We shall have more to say later about this language.

### Sūtra 6: Pure Consciousness Is the Experience of a Love-Filled Presence

The mystical experience is not complete—as I have said before—if it does not encompass the whole of reality, even though it is the *totum in parte*. Reality, however, is not itself complete if we reduce it to an intellectual entelechy or even further to a mere conceptual entity by excluding materiality—unless we reduce reality to the idea of reality alone, to an absolute idealism. In other words, an exclusively intellectualistic mysticism is not the complete mysticism we are trying to describe. It is on this point that Gnosticism, in both its Western and Eastern versions, has excessively loaded the current interpretation of mysticism. It is an endless source of irony or paradoxes that mysticism, when not disembodied by virtue of some intellectual—that is, nonmystical—a priori, is the very experience that allows the body and the sensuous love of life to integrate the fullness of the life of Man, without for this reason losing the hierarchical balance of the three anthropological dimensions of body, soul, and spirit. By hierarchy (ἱερά ἀρχή, *hiera arche*) I mean the “sacred order” that maintains the harmony of reality, and not the prevalence of one part over another.

At this point, it may be opportune to indicate a further consequence of dualist anthropology that has wreaked havoc on a certain form of spirituality or mysticism, as we may call it. A distinction being thus drawn between body and soul, and the soul apparently being the noblest part of the body, dualistic anthropology confers on the former the control and dominion over the latter, subjecting the body to the demands of the soul, which is at the origin of so many negative forms of asceticism. With the spirit failing to intervene as a regulatory element between the two, the body-and-soul dualism leads to well-known excesses on either side. It is the spirit that makes possible the *perichoresis*, as I have already mentioned many times in the section on the Trinity. What befits Man is what is proper to his very reality, which mirrors the same order on the divine or cosmic scale. The cooperation between the three dimensions follows an ontonomic order. No one is in command because an authentic hierarchy recognizes the intrinsic harmony of the whole, and no element is superior to another because no criterion is extrinsic to the distinct parts of the “sacred order” from which the relative importance of individual parts might be evaluated. Every element has its unique function and is therefore beyond comparison. But this is not our topic at present, except for the fact that experience is not divisible into parts.

Our starting point is Man, a being who is corporal by constitution, though not exclusively so, nor solely intellectual, but also spiritual. The greatest peril of a certain

disembodied form of mysticism is an infatuation for heaven, an upward ascent during which the mystic sings his wings and does not know how to come back to earth without ending up battered—as the history of mysticism shows us all too frequently, both in the case of “angelism” and of “animalism,” in the absence of a better term, and harking back to Pascal: “*Qui veut faire l’ange fait la bête.*”

Let us reformulate our *sūtra* less succinctly: pure consciousness is purity of consciousness—that is, consciousness that does not collapse on itself, and does not revert to itself, but is filled with love—and love does not allow consciousness to double back on itself. Love is ecstatic and, therefore, empties consciousness of content; it does not let consciousness reflect, since love is a centrifugal force. There is no synthesis between consciousness and love once they are held separate, but there is the synthesis of a holistic experience that has not severed them, which precedes their splitting, as previously described. This is the experience that finds knowledge by loving and, through love, finds knowledge. This has nothing to do with the vicious circle of logic, but all to do with the vital circle of reality. That a “plain eye,” an “enlightened *bhakti*,” a “new innocence” are needed for the purpose should be obvious. An exclusively intellectual consciousness is not whole; an exclusively emotional love is not the love I mean. As Thomas Aquinas once pointed out, “*Voluntas et intellectus mutuo se includunt.*” I would like to reiterate that formal distinctions are not real divisions. Alternatively, insisting on my preceding remarks, the mystical experience cannot be grasped if we split epistemology from ontology. It should be clear that by ontology I do not mean our *logos* on being, but the *logos of Being* (a subjective possessive), which speaks and of whose language Man is conscious. Therefore, this is not a synthesis between (ecstatic) love and (ecstatic) consciousness, but what we have here is the consciousness of the origin of the a-dualistic dynamism of reality—though we can and should *afterward* analyze them separately: love can be known and knowledge loved. “Whoever fails to love [whoever is not loving: ἀγαπῶν, *agapōn*] does not know God,” says the first letter of St. John—he does not know God, since “God is love.”

From the “erotic attraction” of the Aristotelian Prime Mover, which moves all ὡς ἐρῶμενον (*hos eromenon*, “as loved”); to Kṛṣṇa’s love for his beloved creatures; or God’s declaration of love to Man in the *Bhagavad-gītā*, including the monotheistic God who saw that his creation was good—the Father who, according to Christianity, so loved the world, and Christ, who loved his disciples until the end—the conscious experience of reality (which excludes neither evil nor suffering) is brimming with the lovability of life, in its most literal sense. Were it not so, Buddhist serenity would be meaningless. Reality is loved because it is lovable in itself and it is converted into lovability because it is loved; this intuition is the secret of compassion (*karuṇa*). This *vital circle* I referred to earlier assumes primordial importance here—and shows us in experiential terms that reality is not an immutable objective substance, but a gift that, once given, transforms itself and, once transformed, becomes capable of further transference. This is one of the powers of love. “*Cognitio experimentalis de divina suavitate amplificat cognitionem speculativam de divina veritate,*” says

St. Bonaventure (The experiential knowledge of the divine sweetness increases the speculative knowledge of divine truth).

The mystic intuition is a loving as well as a cognitive experience—that is, we touch reality by both knowledge and love. Mysticism “discovers” that it is only a touch. It is an experience that precedes the split to which I have already alluded. One of its side effects, and also the touchstone of its authenticity, is the liberation from the constraints of reason, which is unable to encompass the whole. Indeed, reason tends toward intellection, searching for a principle that could explain all, but failing to find that “philosopher’s stone.” For instance, reason attempts to find an explanation for the existence of diversity, evil, and so forth. Consequently, to project the solution onto a monotheistic God who is the Supreme Intellect and possessor of the key of reason to everything seems like attempting to cope with the issue by using an artificial postulate beyond the remit of experience; hence, many crises of monotheistic faith take place mainly among intellectuals who, unsatisfied by rationalism, lapse into a negative form of skepticism. One extreme does not justify another, however. Kant was already looking for a limit on reason for faith to remain acceptable.

The mystical experience, the sight of the third eye indistinguishable from that of the other two, lets us feel the flash of light that blinds the intellect without shattering it. Light cannot dazzle the blind. And it is precisely because the mystic sees with an intellect filled with love and feels with a love brimming with knowledge that he can penetrate the mystery, such as it is, and without dissolving it. “Beam of darkness,” “learned ignorance,” “infinite agnosis,” “it is understood by those who do not understand it,” “the cloud of unknowing,” *wuwei*, and so many other analogous expressions are common among the testimonies of mystics, as I have already said.

This dazzling light is the full knowledge of love—or love saturated with knowledge. Mere cognition cannot penetrate the realm where love does not rule; it needs its company. Mere love is puzzled when confronted with reality; it needs consciousness. I have already mentioned the Gospel’s injunction against judging, a piece of advice that can be neither followed nor understood if our only guidance is reason—ah, those criminals! They ought to be tried and punished. Just pardon one tyrant, and immediately another raises his head.

Love does not judge: love-filled knowledge at once knows and loves, and what with the use of sole reason would be a condemnation gives rise to compassion through the mystical experience. There is a political implication of the first importance in this: a judicial system that would fail to be agapic and also erotic decays to the level of talion law. It may be Law, but it is not Justice; it is not *dharma*. A love that is not just decays into anarchy and libertinage—ah, these romantic weaknesses!

There have been theological attempts to legitimize this divorce by separating the δικαιοσύνη (*dikaïosynē*) of the Gospels into justice and justification, thereby inflicting a lethal wound on man’s life. Justice, henceforth, would be political and, for the present world, justification would be religious and otherworldly. It is understandable that, because of the weakening of mysticism and in view of the difficulty in establishing a just rule on earth, some disembodied forms of mysti-

cism have held on to *justification* as their preserve, while relinquishing *justice* to its "earthly" vicissitudes, thereby giving their sanction to the dichotomy between the two. There is no doubting that the material may not be confused with the spiritual, the order of the "public weal" with the order of the "religious," or earth with heaven. Their separation, however, is deleterious, and their identification even worse. The mystical experience restores harmony by recognizing the polarization between the material and the spiritual, the mundane and the celestial, maintaining the tension (*advaita*) without short-circuiting the connection in favor of either polarity.

Expressed differently, Man is not a citizen of two worlds. Mysticism as experience of Life makes us aware of these expedient distinctions without fragmenting the human being. In other words, peace is not *the fruit of justice*, as sometimes interpreted in various passages of the Bible, but justice is born of peace and not vice versa—as the apostle James affirms. Here we have *righteousness and peace* that *embrace*, as we sing in one psalm. If peace is established, then justice can arise and one can only hope for peace if justice is to rule. The mind on its own cannot comprehend it. Love on its own cannot accomplish it. Mysticism is needed. It is not for nothing that one refrain of the *Upaniṣads* reads, *śanti, śanti, śantiḥ* (peace, peace, peace). The theology of liberation consists in the effort of reaching out and harmonizing justification with justice.

Once again, I repeat: Not only does one not know reality without loving it, but one cannot love reality without knowing it. One cannot sing Glory to the Creator if one curses Creation; one may not enjoy *ānanda*, the bliss of Reality, if one despises its Manifestation; one may not enjoy the fullness of Life if one mutilates it; there cannot be a fully human enjoyment if bodily participation has been eliminated—and vice versa. This song of praise, however, must come from spontaneity and not from a cognitive conclusion. This is why consciousness must be empty of self, because it is bursting with love. A mysticism that is sad is a sad kind of mysticism. And a sad mysticism it is that is relegated to deal with matters (or things) of the "other world."

In Christian terms, the love of God and the love for one's neighbor *is* the same love—and one's neighbor is not only the soul but also the body of that love. Mysticism experiences that it *is* the selfsame love, that these *are not* two different forms of love: it is the *advaita*—the nondualistic love. One cannot love God if one does not love what proceeds from him and returns to him, to quote from another *Upaniṣad*. Human love, however, is a love of the mind as well as of the heart, intellectual as well as sensible, made up of awareness as much as of feelings—again, human as much as divine. "At the beginning was Love," the *Atharva-veda* sings, adding that it is *kāma*, or sensual love, that is meant; another hymn calls this the firstborn of the Gods, more or less at the same time as Hesiod's *Theogony*. We need only recall the Jewish and Christian exegesis of the kiss on the mouth in the *Song of Songs*. The *Sefer ha-Zohar*, for example, comments on it thus:

It is not enough that you should say you love me  
because the kiss is the union  
of the spirit with another spirit  
and so the kiss is on the mouth,  
the font and origin of the spirit.

We are touching a delicate point here, in which the distinction between the discourse *upon* mysticism and the mystical experience is glaringly obvious. There are not two kinds of love. One cannot love God if one does not love his Creation (which is not always lovable), nor can one love one's neighbor (who is not always lovable either) if one does not love God (who is not always willing). These are not only inseparable, but they are not even two—although they are also not one. Once again, *advaita*.

There is no mysticism without knowledge, just as there is no mysticism without love, which in turn does not exist without action. In the classical threefold path, the three *mārga*—*jñāna*, *bhakti*, and *karman*—are merely paths, individually suited to a psychological makeup, on a single journey "that is taken on foot" (Machado) toward Fullness. Many exponents of mysticism speak of mystical love in the more or less explicit or sublimated language of human eroticism. This is the level of the descriptions, although many interpretations are dualistic in nature to spare well-meaning blushes. Others, on the other hand, speak openly of "*amor Dei intellectualis*" (Spinoza)—but in the end it is still love that is meant. This by no means detracts from those bodiless "loves" that are mere projections of desires not experienced or mere attraction of a purely carnal nature. Mysticism, like everything human, has its inherent dangers. Psychology is not an obstacle to mysticism.

When mysticism, throughout the ages, insists on the purification of the heart, it is to make us reach a new form of innocence by opening our third eye so that we may not be influenced by the outward aspect of reality. This is precisely why any authentic mysticism wants asceticism (in the primitive sense of the word) but insists, immediately afterward, upon the fact that this "practice," should it not be directed toward the kindling of love and the reaching for freedom, is doubly counterproductive: it withers the heart and swells the pride of the mind—and it is unpleasant as well.

Repeating the same theme using anthropological categories, it could be said that there is in Man an in-dwelling dual force, though I would rather call it an intersecting one: a centrifugal dynamism that projects outward, attracted by Beauty that radiates from without, and there is also a centripetal dynamism that pushes inward, drawn in by Truth, which Man must discover within himself. To allow oneself to be carried away only on the first impulse is frivolity, if not outright concupiscence, and to succumb only to the second is selfishness, if not downright pride. Wisdom is the harmony between the attraction of Beauty and the aspiration toward Truth. At the center is Goodness, which is beautiful and true—as the Greeks discovered. Eve, in her primeval innocence, could not suspect that evil lurked within the fine

alluring tree. She did not know the hermeneutics of suspicion; she did not suspect a possible dichotomy between Truth (in YHWH's words) and Beauty (in the tree). The problem is that she coveted it—as the Buddha would have said.

Pure consciousness, the *vedānta* will say, discovers appearance as such and is thus free to play with appearance when it presents as mere appearance of reality. Pure consciousness, however, is not objective. One falls into despondency (a grave sin in the Christian tradition) when reality and the appearance of reality are confused, when we forget we dwell in *regione dissimilitudinis*, in a region of dissimilarity of mere appearances. True love in union with knowledge gives us the *līlā*, the human-divine game; this is how the Old Testament and the *Veda* describe wisdom for us.

I have repeatedly warned against the dangers of disembodied mysticism, but this does not protect against the opposite temptation to give in to a purely materialistic outlook. The two extremes should be avoided, but while on the subject of mysticism, it seems that our criticism should be more pertinently directed against the attitude of a certain form of mysticism which has opted for a *fuga mundi*, despising the temporal while forgetting the mystical value of *sacred secularity*, as I have had occasion to say more than once. Let us also say that without the experience of human loving it is difficult to outweigh the risk of confusion between divine love and the psychological projection of unsublimated urges; conversely, however, without the experience of divine love it is easy to settle for exclusively human forms of love, thus lapsing into the *amor curvus* that the Medieval Christian mystics so much railed against. Love alone dazzles and blinds us; mere knowledge intoxicates us and makes us insensitive. The aforementioned *hieros gamos* between love and knowledge can subsist only within the nondualistic experience of the *advaita* so often evoked. William of St.-Thierry says "*Amor ipse intellectus est*" (Love is the intellect itself), expressing an opinion that was commonplace in the West until the Renaissance.

A brief comment may be opportune at this point on a much used, abused, and daringly polysemic word. Sanskrit distinguishes between *prema*, *bhakti*, and *kāma*; Greek between *philia*, *eros*, and *agapē*; and Latin between *amor*, *caritas*, and *dilectio*—to which may be added desire, concupiscence, affection, goodwill, and also an infinity of synonyms such as affection, devotion, tenderness, and passion, as well as innumerable derivatives besides.

Every word has its nuance and differences, but there is a certain wisdom, though not immune from dangers, in the use of the all-encompassing word "love," as a synthesis of the constitutive tendency of human beings, and on an even wider scale, of all reality: the centrifugal dynamism that drives every being toward another, toward transcendence, toward difference, externality, the unknown—the *alter* as *altera pars* that makes us whole. This dynamism runs through the whole reality toward Fullness.

This dynamism is twofold: centrifugal and centripetal forces for love and knowledge—a dual dynamism, which I would never call two dynamisms. It is the same motion but in two opposite directions. Falling into the trap of dualism between love and knowledge has had serious consequences in human history. The will, as the symbol of movement toward an end, is imbued with knowledge (as Thomas



Aquinas has it, "*Oportet igitur in quolibet intelligente venire etiam voluntatem*" [Therefore every intelligent (nature) also ought to have a will]: it is involved, as I have already pointed out. Here we meet again with the nondualistic nature of these two tendencies inherent in every being. This experience that there is no love without knowledge or knowledge without love is a gateway to mysticism, but of course the gate has to be opened.

I started by saying that the mystical experience cannot be a specialization, but I must also point out that the tendency toward specialization that exists within Western thought carries with it the attending risk of separating what is intrinsically connected. Well before Anders Nygren's classic study of the *eros-agapē* distinction within Christian Scripture, there was already a reduction (if not a degradation) of the former to human attraction and an exalting of the latter to divine love status; certain Christian mystics had introduced a dichotomy between an agapic love exclusively turned toward God and another erotic form of love directed toward mankind of an especially sexual nature—even though such an apparently "intellectual" mystic as Thomas Aquinas defines sensual *insensibilitas* as a vice. This dichotomy between a sensual (erotic) and another spiritual (agapic) form of love has proved detrimental to the interpretation of the mystical experience, as well as not actually making philosophical sense. The sources are ancient; the Buddha inveighs against desire (which he calls "thirst"), and the *Gītā* seems to extol the most complete indifference toward life's vicissitudes. The *ataraxia* and the *apatheia* taught by the Stoics of Greece and Rome would also make good examples if we wanted to caricature these notions. However, a healthy corrective to an excess can also turn into something verging on the pathological. In my dialogue with some of these traditions, I have introduced the distinction between the *desire* provoked by an object that is extrinsic (and thus not only external) and the *aspiration* that arises from the very viscera of the human being and ultimately from any being. The earlier quotation from Aquinas is supported by Aristotle's saying that "no virtue can run contrary to the natural inclination."

The mystical experience accepts all the distinctions that the intellect deems necessary, but it does not effect any separation, testing the nonduality between love and knowledge as a harmonic whole that issues from the dynamism of our own nature and, in the final analysis, from all beings.

And there can be "eunuchs" for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, since even the blind, the lame, and the infirm are called to the "kingdom," but this is not to say that human fullness regards only the spiritual side of our being. It may well be that it is up to the mysticism of our own times to achieve a fuller realization of the cited *hieros gamos*—though without necessarily interpreting it in the literal form of its classical meaning.

This *sūtra* speaks of a consciousness that is filled with love but that may not exist without being filled at the same time with knowledge. In spite of the distinction between intellectual and moral consciousness, there is also deep wisdom in forbearing to separate them. Perfect consciousness is consciousness of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness without possible separation. When, typically, our Western mode

of thought tells us that the entire consciousness is consciousness *of* something, while the more traditional East assures us that pure consciousness is consciousness of nothingness, the former is emphasizing the primacy of consciousness and the latter the primacy of love. Consciousness is a centripetal motion: we assimilate an object, we incorporate something, we bring it toward our center, and we grasp something from without. Love is a centrifugal dynamism; it issues *forth*, it brings gifts, it grows out, it gives away, and it is not the absorption of anything. But we should not divide the East from the West, as there is in all of us a place where the sun rises and another where the sun sets. If mere knowledge discriminates, only love does not judge. According to the Gospels, the "Father" shall make a distinction between the just and the sinners, but he does not judge them, since he makes the sun rise for them all without passing moral judgment. Mysticism transcends these dichotomies. It is all but obvious that to allow consciousness to be filled with love it must be devoid of all other content, just as it should be obvious that for it to be filled with knowledge it must also be emptied of every desire. "Love God with *all* your mind" (διάνοια, *dianoia*), says the Bible. "Empty yourself entirely of everything" is the hope of the Zen and Yoga schools of spirituality, among others. But only the *all* is compatible with *nothingness*. Extremes meet because neither time nor reality follows a linear path.

A major challenge to modern philosophy in the aftermath of the so-called emancipation of epistemology from all ontology consists in transcending the epistemological dogma according to which all knowledge implies the discrimination between a (conscious) subject and a (known) object—which would be the concept that represents the thing (the *noumenon*). Along with conceptual consciousness, for which love is not an absolute necessity, there is also a symbolic form of consciousness that requires the issuing forth of the knower (and thus of love) to participate in the symbol and in its discovery as such—that is, in order to love it. The symbol makes no claim to pure subjectivity. If a symbol is not a symbol for me, then it ceases to be a symbol. The symbol is a symbol only when it symbolizes, as a song becomes a song only when it is sung.

As I shall have occasion to say again, it is the loving dimension of the mystical experience that saves us from falling into solipsism and from burial into ourselves, even if we listen to God in our innermost being: the divine can also be found without. On the other hand, the intellectual dimension of the mystical experience saves us from lapsing into credulity and sentimentalism. The mystical experience holds the balance between introversion and extroversion. The mystic is neither an activist nor an "intimist." Martha and Mary, in Christian terms, are the two parts of the "necessary One." Or, as St. Teresa of Avila says, with feminine elegance, in her *Moradas*, "Martha and Mary must remain united to play host to the Lord."

In a nutshell, the mystical experience is both an experience of the intellect and an experience of love. And even if not every experience of love is a mystical experience, it has the potential to become one. Similarly, not every experience of the intellect is mystical, even if it can become such an experience. The road to mysticism, for this

reason, is open to all—which does not mean, I insist, that it is not a “hidden path,” as Luis de León used to sing (“hidden,” but not inaccessible).

The path is not hidden to remain the privilege of the chosen few but because the split I spoke of earlier has made it so. Knowledge, on its own, does not translate into action, and love alone does not persevere in its intent. The mystical experience that, to be an integral experience, makes us one and transforms us becomes manifest in our practice and is activity as well as stillness, effort as well as calm—it is the “silent music” of the Castilian mystical poet.

In Plotinus, the pure, love-filled consciousness that is unaware of itself is called “seeing and feeling the presence” (ἰδεῖν καὶ αἰσθάνεσθαι παρόντος, *idein kai aisthanesthai parontos*). Mystics who are theists have called it the “presence of God”; some describe it as the abode of a divine guest who in some way breaks our isolation, but respects our solitude; others speak of a nonmediated presence from which we may not depart without ceasing to be ourselves. This presence engulfs us and would blind us if we looked at it from outside. “In lumine tuo videbimus lumen” (We shall see the light within your light), sings a psalm upon which Christian mystics have widely commented. There is a single light, not two; nor is it necessary to be able to see anything else, as Plotinus, among many others, said. Another psalm has it that “God spoke only once” (ἅπαξ, *apax*), even if we hear him twice. . . . Mystics who are not theists may be able to “feel” with even more intensity “this” presence, but they do not project it onto another being. Both kinds of mystics are “touched” by the presence, but they interpret it differently, as the next *sūtra* explains.

As I mentioned earlier, this love-filled presence implies a major discovery: the experience of the person—that is, the discovery of the *you*. The person is not the individual. It follows that no authentic mysticism can be individualistic; the “other,” however, is not the you. The other is revealed by the intellect; the you, by love. Love is both ecstatic and unitive: it catapults us out of ourselves and makes us one with the beloved. There is no mysticism without love, and there is no love without being transported outside of oneself toward the beloved. This “beloved” cannot be our self; mysticism is not narcissism. This “beloved” cannot be just any other; mysticism is not alienating—but both pitfalls are all too real. The “beloved” is not another and is not me; it is a you that I love as myself, expanding the limitations of my ego. The love experience of the you is the simplest example of the a-dual experience: the you is neither the other nor the I.

The experience of love is open to every human being, but it is not an animal experience: it is a spiritual experience; it is neither simple attraction for a body nor the mere projection of a mind or even less the dialectic struggle between the two. It is the aspiration of the spirit that the pure heart feels when it has overcome the two instincts and has integrated them into what I describe as mystical, although it is often not labelled as such, primarily because it is unnecessary, and secondarily because of the corruption of the word.

Having reached this point, we should not overlook a latent problem underlying all that we have said and shall say, but that we cannot mention at every step of the way. We are trying to penetrate the mystical experience, however, and thus a description of the positive and, I should add, realistic aspects of this experience is now imperative. As I mentioned earlier, however, perils and ambiguities are hidden in the primordial human mystical experience—as in anything that is human.

*“Corruptio optimi pessima”* (The corruption of the best is the worst corruption). It is significant that this saying is attributed to such a passionate man as St. Jerome—while a poet such as Shakespeare accidentally provides us with a gloss: “Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.” I obviously refer to the problem of mysticism as the degeneracy of the best. It is almost an obligation in this case to say that I mean a false mysticism, fallacious knowledge, and hatred as a form of evil love. I have already said that mysticism as an ultimate experience is beyond any rigorous phenomenological or rational description, but there is no such difficulty in identifying pseudo-mysticism. In the “land of men,” however, the wheat and the chaff grow together, and we are told not to separate them “before the appointed time arrives.” It follows that the “discernment of the spirits” (*viveka*) is a gift of spiritual masters when giving advice. Let us try to explain this further.

In monotheistic traditions, the most perfect creature is the devil, who can appear to us as an angel of light: there can also be a form of “satanic mysticism” that, even though I cannot bring myself to call it so, has all the appearance of mysticism. The love that we spoke about can turn into hatred; the knowledge we praised can be applied to diabolical ends. We cannot, in brief, deny the existence of evil.

Some philosophies will hold that it is deprivation, others that it is error, another again that it is unexplainable, a scandal, or perhaps a false appearance. At any rate, it is undeniable that evil, in the world we live in, is a *real* factor to reckon with—whether on sound metaphysical grounds or not. Mysticism is not immune from this “ill weed.” And when I speak of evil, I am not speaking only of moral ills, but I include suffering and disease, as well as depression and madness.

This problem is much more serious in the case of mysticism since, as we claim that “bad” mysticism is not mysticism, it would be quite reasonable to ask us what meta-mystical criterion is to be used to brand “bad” mysticism as “false”—hence, my insistence on the fact that we cannot leave out of consideration the “three eyes” when we are alluding to what the mystical experience is. The body has as much of a say as reason in the matter and reason as much as enlightenment—however we may want to call it. We encounter again the *perichôrêsis* mentioned several times earlier. The body does not have the last word; we need to listen to it and understand it. But the last word does not belong to any supreme faculty either. The ultimate judgment is not incumbent on anyone. As highlighted before, no one prevails in the Trinity. What matters here is mutual acknowledgment and “natural” acceptance of the order that constitutes reality—of its harmony, as I have said before and as I will say again.

Evil in all its aspects has a revelatory function: it makes us feel our contingency; it opens to us the great mysteries of reality and Life. Evil is not intelligible. Neither

is Goodness, but we take refuge in it, and it does not assail us. Evil, on the other hand, is an inconvenience that we do not find natural. It begs an explanation, it sends us on a collision course with our contingency, it makes realists of us, and it is a lesson for our mind. This seems sufficient to deal with the topic in question—besides, it shows us how all these problems are interconnected, and thus how we cannot dodge the issue.

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We can *summarize* once more by mentioning the apparent contradiction, more than once alluded to, between Silence and the Word. Plutarch wrote that “we learn silence from the Gods and speech from men.” It is impossible, however, to separate the authentic silence from the true word. In the living experience, it is I, without doubt, who live it out, but in my awareness of its ineffability I am already presupposing that I will not be able to communicate it with words because the word runs out and experience transcends the word—hence, the paradox that the impossibility of communicating through the word reveals a silent communion subtending my awareness. “*Potentia scriptoris perfecti in arte sua cum non scripserit*,” as a cryptic phrase of Avicenna translates into Latin: “The power of a writer who has reached the perfection of his art [is revealed] when he does not write.” There is nothing new in the discovery that silence is frequently more communitarian and unitive than the word. In this sense, the whole mystical experience is, paradoxically, participative. Nothing is more visible than the deepest thoughts of a heart in love, says a Chinese proverb. Silence is not the contradiction of the Word; it is not the non-Word but the absence of the Word and its origin, as affirmed by a Father of the Church whose commentary on the Trinity said that the *logos*, the Word, stems from the silence of the Father. The perfect consciousness is precisely the pure experience that is not conscious of itself. This mystical experience incarnated within our complex being, therefore, is an experience overlaid by various anthropological layers that I shall attempt to describe in the following chapters.

### Sūtra 7: What We Call Experience Is the Result of Multiple Factors

We can reduce Experience to a simple formula:  $E = e.l.m.i.r.a.$ , where,

e = experience  
l = language  
m = memory  
i = interpretation  
r = reception  
a = actualization

We have already said in the second *sūtra* that experience is immediate—a conscious touch. “Knowledge in action over and above any concept,” as Maximus the Confessor calls it in one of his answers to Thalassius. If experience were not immediate it would have to resort to something else as a foundation. This “something” would therefore be the ultimate foundation to which we have access. Therefore, we would have to call the something “experience.”

Perhaps this “something” is not *us*, but is *in us*—“is here,” as St. Teresa said. However much we project this “something” outside ourselves, we can never get away from the “projector.” We cannot leap ahead of our shadow; we cannot abandon our immanence. As a result, by realizing this impossibility, we can come closer to transcendence, to what is above us.

The mystical experience does not separate immanence from transcendence, although our intellect may distinguish between them; this nonknowing could be a phenomenological characteristic of the mystical experience. “I know not if in the body or outside it,” says St. Paul. In any case, we cannot, in fact, escape from the body that is us, nor from our consciousness that manifests our body, soul, and spirit. We can identify with something that transcends us, but we cannot escape from the “we” that the transcendence itself rests on (or at least from which it springs). We cannot abandon our immanence, but only, occasionally, our awareness of it. The *anima*, the *psychē*, is *panta*, all things, but in a sense *pōs*—in that it can be conscious of everything, albeit only in a certain way (Aristotle). Man is the *metron*, the measure (of course, not quantitative), the criterion (albeit not definitive) of all things—to echo Protagoras. But Man is not all things. No one can leap ahead of his shadow, but without outside light there would be no shadow—and we are conscious of this light (if only by seeing our own shadow). To put it another way, we reach the experience of reality through a multiple *mediation* that allows us to speak of it.

We have already made a critical distinction between the *mediation* of mysticism and the *intermediaries* of discursive knowledge. The mediator is more than just communication: it is communion. The intermediaries are like catalytic agents that encourage a chemical reaction but do not appear in the result. Rational induction would be a similar type of agent that allows logical deductions. For example, by way of certain pieces of arithmetical or geometrical evidence we can arrive at the formulation of Pythagoras’s theorem, but a sharp geometrical mind can convert the intermediary into mediation; that is, it can reach the immediate evidence of the theorem. Therefore, it does not need the intermediary of the reasoning—although it may have reached the mediation through the intermediary. We have already mentioned an example of this “critical distinction”—the idea of Christ as mediator and not as intermediary.

Using a phrase from St. John’s Gospel, we have said that the temporal difference between seeing Jesus and seeing the Father is not secondary. The sensory experience of the apostles was that of seeing Jesus, but the genuine holistic experience was that of seeing the Father—although perhaps they understood it (saw that they had seen him) only after Pentecost. Those who saw only with their bodily eyes only saw Jesus,

but those who saw with the eyes of faith saw the Father, too, and realized they had seen him not in a later vision, but in the actual *advaita* or a-dual intuition that embraces the threefold dimensions of time. A Muslim phrase describes the holy or enlightened one by saying that he is the one who sees the oak tree in an acorn, the butterfly in a chrysalis, and the saint in a sinner. I cannot resist the temptation to add a personal footnote to this last thought: perhaps the vision of a saint in the sinner is what actually helps one come closer to sanctity.

The *advaita* intuition is virtually concomitant with the mystical experience. The intermediary is a messenger, a go-between, a uniting thread between two realities; the intermediary facilitates communication. The peculiarity of mystical knowledge lies in the fact that the factors we shall mention are experienced as mediations and not as simple intermediaries. No experience can be a deduction, although it is necessary to have a basic knowledge of geometry in our first example (Pythagoras) and Christian faith in our second one (Christ). This "critical distinction" is what enables us to distinguish between a purely rational discourse on mysticism (based on evidence from mystics as intermediaries) and a true mystical discourse (based on consciousness of the mediations that we shall indicate later).

Once again we underline the idea of distinction without separation. It would be equally erroneous, however, to ignore the distinctions that are not seen in pure experience (*e*). And so we cannot separate *e* from *E*. In pure experience the mystic does not experience mediations as intermediaries. But, given that he consciously expresses his experience, he has to recognize that he is relying on intermediaries; he speaks a language, and he recalls and interprets it within a specific cultural world, and so forth.

From a logical point of view, we should have started with language as the primary mediation, since the way we approach the problem depends on language. Strictly speaking, though, it is a purely formal order, as we are dealing with mediation and not intermediary, the one implicit in the other, and which we must distinguish although we cannot separate them. But heuristically we have to follow an order. Experience *E* does not *exist* without its corresponding factors, even if our mind can and must think that there *is* (formally) an experience *e* that is at its root.

A merely analytical thought process would conclude that we arrive at *e* by induction because we are aware of *E*. Pure experience *e* is not the result of induction from *E*, but is inherent in its origin as the light that lets us see the experience *E* in all its splendor, despite the fact that it is actually invisible. Only the initiated can enter the Temple, as the ancients said, because the others look without seeing and hear without comprehending. The *disciplina arcani*, despite its abuses, is not an elitist esotericism but the recognition of a sacred hierarchy (if I can be forgiven the hyperbole) in the very structure of reality. When we start from our knowledge of *E* and try to induce the existence of an unknowable (and therefore unprovable) *e*, we do not end up with the experience *e* but with a formal concept *e'* that replaces *e* but is not *e*.

Far less is it possible to *deduce* *e* from *E*. There are different interpretations of *e* that contradict us. The pure experience *e*, being an experience, is not known through

induction or deduction. If *e* is claimed to be ineffable, the experience of *e* transcends our language. But we continue to speak of an *e'* whose intentionality is *e*, but which is not *e*. Rather, we could say that it is and is not *e*. This *e'* is the *e* that refers to the mystical in its experience, but is not so much *e* as *E*—when it is spoken of.

From this perspective it is evident that we should start from pure experience, which is what we are trying to clarify. The experience is found at the beginning. This beginning, though—as pure experience that is not conscious even of itself—is then pure silence and pure nothingness. And so I can only get to this pure experience *e* by way of the above-mentioned mediations. This pure experience is above any kind of judgment or evaluation; we only ever see it dressed up, as is usually the case with the human body. But there is an intellectual modesty that does not diminish our intelligibility. The experience *e* is neither a postulate nor a deduction; it is a pure presence inherent in each of the factors. It is truly discovered as the dimension of the infinite (divine) present in every being. Too often, however, human history has witnessed so-called mystical phenomena that have turned out to be spurious and damaging. They are often experiences that are simply psychological, if not pathological, and have consequently tarnished the name of mysticism itself. With this premise, then, we have decided to start from *e* as the ineffable experience, since that is what it is.

When speaking of the ineffable, there occurs something similar to lying, of which there is no possible phenomenology since a lie is in the intention and not in the objective phenomenon. A lie is such only if I let myself be convinced by it. If I realize that someone is lying to me, the statement in question ceases to be a lie; it loses its phenomenological objectivity and its power to deceive. The *noëma* of the liar is not the *pisteuma* of those who believe the lie. Equally, although inversely, the mystical language says what it means only when I realize the fact that language betrays what it says, when I discover that it does not purport to say what it says, but that it cannot say it any other way. The ineffable can only be spoken of as a lie—in the hope that the listener will realize the fact (and so it ceases to be a lie). It follows that one has to have had the mystical experience in order to “understand” the mystical language—in order to discover the lie within it. I have to understand the Maya language to understand what a Maya is saying. We cannot capture the *pisteuma* of the believer by capturing it just as *noëma*. A purely rationalist interpretation of mystical phenomena will therefore conclude that they are more or less paranormal, or even pathological, experiences with no objectivity—thereby confusing what is “objective” with what is real. In short, it is no more satisfying to vent oneself with useless words than it is to be closed off in silence. Medieval Christian exegesis understood that Scripture “*dum narrat textum (gestum), prodit mysterium*” (as it recounts text or events brings us to mystery).

The various factors of experience are inseparable from experience itself, and many of them are in some way simultaneous. In fact, all these concomitant factors are necessary not only in order properly to describe experience (*E*), but also for those who, in the silence of experience, are aware of it. In every conscious language, thought accompanies us and helps us realize that we have surpassed or eliminated



every thought. We find ourselves once again face to face with *advaita* consciousness, which recognizes the polarity and does not reduce consciousness to intellectual intelligibility.

With this preliminary caution we shall now move on to the description of these very different and very interconnected factors.

### *Experience*

And so, what is this *experience* (*e*) that we "say" is ineffable? It is certainly the main player in the experience (*E*) that we are dealing with. What refers is *e*, even though what is referred to still appears as *E*. If we reduce *e* to zero, everything collapses and there is no experience *E*. We refrain from quantifying this description, and indeed we have used the term "factor" (from *facere*) in an etymological, not mathematical, sense. If we wanted, nevertheless, to honor the algebraic tradition, our formula would serve to indicate that *e* essentially qualifies all the other factors, and that any change in them would change *E*. This modification of *E* is what leads us to think that *e* also has an influence on its modification—thus "justifying" the well-known classifications of different classes of mysticism: prophetic, introvert, Christian, active, and so on. The various types of mysticism, over which there is so much discussion today (given the Western tendency toward classification), are founded solely on an induction on *e* based on differences seen in *E*. Moreover, these differences have only been seen using our own interpretative tools. The classifications refer to *E*, not to *e*, which is nonclassifiable. From this point of view they are legitimate and useful. The formula would then become:  $E = e$  (*l.m.i.r.a.*).

Coming back to the experience *e*, we can only repeat what we have already said: if we reduce *e* to zero, there is no experience *E*. Yet as soon as we attribute a particular content to *e*, we are thereby making a thing of it (objectifying it) and *saying* something about it according to how it appears in our consciousness; we are already mediating it—since all experience is immediate. In the contrary case—that is, if we do not at some point overcome all the mediations—then it just goes on "to infinity." We have to stop at some point, and this point is the pure experience (*e*). We have just said, however, that we cannot give it any content without infecting it with our limitations and mediating it with *our* mediations—which have no reason to be universal. To say, for example, that only the Christian or the theist experience is valid entails attributing to *e* what does not belong to *e*, as such. This experience (*e*) is devoid of contents; it is pure emptiness, to use a symbol that itself must be removed. In order to maintain that our experience is valid, we must go down to the *agora* of philosophy; to maintain that *only* ours is valid, we must go even further to the *gymnasium* of dialectics—but first we have to agree on the choice of weapons (logic, intuition, sentiment, pragmatism . . .), which means going back to the *agora* to discuss it.

To enter for a moment into the vicissitudes of the formula, we must agree that *e* cannot be zero, and, at the same time, we cannot attribute any special value to it

that, deriving from our notion of *e*, would modify *E* in our favor. Only one value is attributed to *e*, and that is *I*—a value that does not alter the influence of the other factors and that is, moreover, charged with a deep symbolism. This experience *e* is one experience, not in the sense that it is the same one, but in the sense that it is unique in every case, and uniqueness is not comparable. We can only make comparisons from a common base, and that already contradicts uniqueness.

In short, this *e* is the *pure consciousness* that we mentioned in the previous *sūtra*—with the addition that its constituting factors do not render it impure but real.

There follow three important *corollaries*.

1. The *first* corollary, as we have said, is that we cannot isolate this experience in and of itself, and therefore we cannot affirm that it is the same in all cases or that it differs according to cultures and religions. In both these cases we are not talking about *e*, but about an *e* seen through *E*. Much as we may wish to purge the pure experience of all its "factors," we shall never manage to do so. Even if we adopt a tendency to silence, the fact that we do so from a certain perspective and in a certain direction is already a modification. When Leibniz had the ingenious idea of infinitesimal calculus, he spoke of a *quantité négligeable* that allowed us to overcome the limitation of "derivations." In our case, any remnant of content (conscious of the experience *e*) cannot be ignored. The path by which we arrive at *e* already modifies it, even though formally we may be aware of such a modification. Furthermore, there is no sense in discussing whether mystical experience is the same or different within the various mysticisms. Anyhow, the discussion shows traces of crypto-Kantianism. An "*e* in itself" does not exist, though our mind thinks that it does—in the intelligible sphere, of course. Many of the contemporary discussions on the mystical experience succumb to this crypto-Kantianism: they treat *e* as a *noumenon* of which *E* is the phenomenon. We cannot refer to *e* in any way without taking some account of *E*. The phenomenological *epoché* in this case is impossible because both the *noëma* and the *pisteuma* are reflectively conscious, and therefore we already interpret them according to our categories.

To put it another way, mystical phenomena exist, but any phenomenology of mysticism, even when it succeeds in describing a certain *pisteuma*, cannot convert it into a *noëma*, far less into a *noumenon*.

For this reason, true mystics do not argue, and when they hear the language of others (without claiming that the experience is exactly the same), they participate in the experiences of other mystics to the extent that they transcend their languages. They may think that the interpretations of the others are inadequate, but they are fully aware that theirs, too, are contingent. Too many words and too much paper and ink have been wasted on this problem in recent times; it is not insoluble because it is not a problem.

2. The *second* corollary would appear to resolve, in the field of mysticism, the current and hotly debated issue of "religious pluralism." Once we have removed all the ontological prolegomena and historical explanations, it boils down to the question of whether the different experiences *E* of different religions and schools

of spirituality are equally valid. Would it then be irrelevant whether we followed one religion or another?

The answer is quite clear: No. It is not irrelevant for a religion's respective followers. And the explanation is based on the distinction between the mediations of our respective beliefs and the intermediaries through which we arrive at them. We can understand that people who have arrived at their own religious beliefs through certain *intermediaries* will admit without difficulty that the experience of faith could be arrived at through any other intermediary—as long as it performed its proper function. For example, I arrive at the knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth and believe what the Gospels say through the *history* that has been taught me. I can therefore understand how others may arrive at an equivalent belief by other routes (intermediaries). For them, pluralism is self-evident and not much more than common sense. This is enough to silence both the fanaticism of exclusivists and the naivety of inclusivists.

Conversely, we can equally understand that those who have had the experience of faith through a concrete *mediation* cannot separate it from the experience itself, and they see "pluralism" as a superficial form of eclecticism and an abdication, not to say betrayal, of their faith. An orthodox Christian cannot separate his experience of Christ from his faith in Christ's divinity; a pure Marxist cannot accept compromises on liberating justice; a genuine Shivaist will see Śiva everywhere; a sincere atheist cannot accept the idea of a Supreme Being who resolves the problems of humanity; a Buddhist believer cannot free himself from the conviction that all these discourses are secondary and represent a barrier to the search for an ultimate end, and so on. When I arrive at my *E*, via those mediations that make it immediate to me, I cannot separate it from my experience (*e*). And so my *E* appears as a unique experience. Someone else's *E* is not convincing to me and, although I have to tolerate it, I cannot accept it by relativizing my own. This relativization is not relativism; it is the consciousness of my contingency and of the relativity of my mediations, which for me remain valid, but which I must not extrapolate beyond my own cultural universe. In order to pass judgment on another *E*, we have to examine the different mediations that have brought us to our respective *Es*.

The problem in today's world is urgent and once again insoluble except through mysticism. Indeed, we generally study pluralism as (though it were) a concept. If the concept is equivocal, then we do not talk about it and thus dialogue is prevented. If the concept is univocal and pluralism means that *the same* (unique) "truth" can be articulated in many different ways, then we shall be forced to admit either that these different ways say the same thing or that the concept of truth itself is analogous, at which point we will have found a *primum analogatum* that can only be formal as a common denominator and will not satisfy anyone, given that truth—especially religious truth—cannot be a mere abstraction. In reality, what happens is that, in general, we are unable to get beyond conceptual thought: pluralism is not a concept but an attitude.

Half a century ago I wrote that true tolerance (*ὑπομόνη*, *hypomonē*, patience) is a mystical virtue that discovers that every being is unique and therefore incomparable. We have to meet the other in order to realize that we need not and cannot abandon our mediations—just as the other need not and cannot abandon his—but we must relativize them. Our *Es* are different and do not have a common denominator because the *e* has not and cannot have any qualification. As we have already said, we cannot get to the *e* of another through any dialectical method. Respect and tolerance are imposed. What we can and must do, however, is to critique the other's *E* while also opening ourselves to critique. The disagreement takes place in the dialogical dialogue, where, by penetrating the *logos* (διὰ τὸν λόγον, *dia ton logon*), it is possible to reach the conviction that we are participating in one and the same *e*. This would be the ideal case, but in general, asymptotically, we come close to an agreement. And so we come to the third corollary.

3. This *third* corollary is equally important. We have said that the *e* is not zero, because otherwise the *E* would disappear, too. But we have also been careful to avoid saying that this *e* is *not*—that would be the equivalent of zero in our formula. At this point language is insufficient. We cannot say that the *e* is "something," but equally we cannot say it *is* nothing, because nothing transcends being: it neither *is* nor *is not*.

Here we must make an observation on the dialectical form of our grammar: in saying that "we cannot say that it is nothing," we are not stating that it "*is* nothing"—that would be a contradiction. Nothing simply *is not* (it is not even nothing). To speak about nothing transcends the principle of noncontradiction, but does not negate it. This bare experience shows us the vacuity (*śūnyatā*), the nothingness to which so many mystical texts refer. This is something different from the Hegelian identification of Being with Non-Being since we have no means to distinguish them. Moreover, the Nothing present in a large part of the Buddhist cosmovision has little to do with Western, especially post-Christian, nihilism.

We should not translate vacuity (*śūnyatā*) as Non-Being (*non-ens*), whose very verbal structure exhibits the primacy of the principle of noncontradiction that is inherent in dialectical thought. We do not arrive at vacuity through the negation of Being. The experience of vacuity is not subordinate to the experience of Being. It is not by beginning from Being that we arrive at Nothing—thereby negating Being (dialectically). We do *not* get to *śūnyatā* by starting with Being, then emptying it of its contents and negating it. The experience of vacuity is a primordial experience.

Conversely, however, we do not arrive at Being by filling the void with contents (filling it with Being). The experience of Being is not subordinate to the experience of the nothingness of things. They are two parallel paths that meet in infinity (in the mystical experience) because previously they had their beginnings in the abyss (bottomless, infinite) of (human) contingency. The experience of Being is a primordial experience.

This is wonderfully expressed in both Spanish and Portuguese without the need to resort to dialectical negation: Nothing does not mean "non-Being," but absence of Being (nonborn, *non-natum*, *ajāta* in Sanskrit); but this is not absence in the sense of privation—the negation of something that should be, like a miscarried child who

never came to be. I cannot resist mentioning that a Scholastic like Thomas Aquinas used four terms that are similar but not identical: *privatio*, *spoliatio*, *remotio*, and *defectus*. True philosophy is not exclusively conceptual. Neither is Nothing simply pure potency—which remains an intellectual postulate for explaining becoming as the passage from non-Being to Being. We can and should distinguish between a philosophy of Being and a philosophy of Nothing, but we cannot separate them, since the latter must necessarily use the language of the former, and the former without the latter would be fossilized and suffocated for lack of movement and freedom. Once again, the key is the polarity discovered in the *advaita* experience. This means that the language of the philosophy of Nothing is not simply the dialectical negation of the philosophy of Being; it is not its contradiction—although perhaps it is the “absolute contradictoriness” that opens the door to Nothing, in the words of Nishida Kitarī, founder of the so-called School of Kyoto, in an attempt to explain his meaning to his readers.

Nothing is not the *asat* (Non-Being) of the philosophies of *ātman*; it is, rather, the vacuity of the philosophies of *anātman*. This *nothing* is the core of the mystical experience. In some ways the mystical dimension of reality is more akin to Buddhism than to the philosophies of Being—especially where Being is identified with Substance. It is understandable, then, that in the Western world, and especially the monotheistic West that has interpreted God as Supreme Being, there is a certain protective attitude against the mysticism of pure experience, which seems to want to surpass Being and therefore deny God. It is well known that mysticism is a source of suspicion in all monotheisms, though they have never managed to silence the great mystics of the Abrahamic cultural tradition. “And Paul saw nothing” (in his fall on the road to Damascus), as Meister Eckhart says, because this Nothing “is” God. “And on the Mountain, nothing,” writes St. John of the Cross, who grew up on the apophatism of Thomas Aquinas, who himself got it from Dionysius the Areopagite. We must get over the cliché that the East is mystical and the West materialistic—although modern techno-scientific civilization is so at the moment.

We come back to what we said in our previous *sūtra*: the integration between knowledge and love. To think of Nothing is not to theorize about non-Being; it is not to create room for Being so that it can move around and perhaps also be free. When a mystical theist talks about the absence of God and suffers for this absence, he means that if he did not love God he would not feel his absence. One does not suffer for the absence of an unknown person: “And you left me (loved one) mourning.” The language of Nothing is a language of love that the pure intellect does not speak, *neti, neti* (that is not it, that is not it). The fact that so many mystics have turned to poetry is not a matter of poetic license; it is the language of love.

*Hace tal obra el amor  
después que lo conocí  
que si hay bien o mal en mí  
todo lo hace (de) un sabor.*

Love does such a work  
 once it has been known  
 that what is good or ill in me  
 love makes it taste the same . . .

... in the song of St. John of the Cross—the same taste, perhaps, but then Man does not live by taste alone, any more than he does by bread alone. Mysticism does not exempt us from the human condition—as we comment upon further in the last *sūtra*. This brings us to speak of the relationship between these two philosophies and to highlight the need for both, even though their relationship is not dialectical but a-dual (*advaita*).

An observation may help to clarify what we mean here. In the "Philosophies of Nothing," there is no metaphysical place for the "should be," or ultimately for ethics as such—which does not mean that they are immoral. In the "Philosophy of Being" the "Should Be" is predominant, and duty is essential. If God is Being, then what he *is* is what Should-Be. Duty (or the Law) is ontologized. Congruent consequences of this are, for example, hell and capital punishment. Be that as it may, genuine philosophers of both tendencies always find compromises. Taoist "nonaction" (*wuwei*) is not a kind, indifferent passivism—we see this beautifully expressed in the *wu* ideogram, which means "thing" and "nothing" at the same time. Cultural frontiers cannot be crossed by bypassing customs. "For the just man there is no law," says St. Paul in an Abrahamic framework. This corresponds to overcoming the morality of the Should-Be through the idea of the *naïṣ-karmya-siddhi*, transcending the notion that we are the ultimate agents of our own actions, or the *kartṭva-bhāva* of the *Gītā*, in an Oriental framework, that place us above moral imperatives. The two philosophies are both necessary. But it is not our task here to pursue this discourse further; to do so would certainly require the establishment of some clear reference points.

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To avoid the potential confusion between *E* and *e*, there has been an attempt to introduce the term "living" (*vivenza*, *Erlebnis*) as experience *in statu nascendi*. "Living" could be defined as the *experience of Life*, very much in tune with the previously cited Aristotelian phrase that the Latins translated as *vita viventibus est esse* (life for the living is their being). "Living" could also be said to be life lived following reflection upon it; it would therefore be the pure life on to which conscience is etched. I recognize that this term has a certain attraction and some advantages, but I have not yet decided to adopt the term "living" because it has psychological and individual connotations from which I would like to see the term "experience" freed.

### *Language*

Experience is ineffable, but we do *talk* about it. Our *language* (*l*) colors whatever we say with the nature of the language that we are using, and in which all our personal

culture, which has affected our way of seeing things and our thought patterns, both individually and collectively, is tightly bound up. As soon as we open our mouth, we reveal not only our personality but also all of our humanity, or at least the humanity that has forged our language.

We identify language as inseparable from experience not only because, *de facto*, it is experience that we are speaking about, but also because, *de jure*, language is more than a vehicle that takes us to its contents and which can then be dispensed with at will. Language actually configures our experience itself.

The prevailing nominalism of scientific parlance, which puts labels (indeed, numbered labels) on all that is observable, leads us to believe that words are just signs and not symbols—that is to say, there is a so-called referent that is independent of the referencer language. This occurs with scientific “terms” but not with (human) “words”; modern science, however, does tend to relate the observer with the observation. In words that I call “human” because they spring from the depths of Man and not from an artificial paradigm, every referent is inseparable from the referencer. Though we may admit that language refers to its referent as a “thing in itself,” like a Platonic form that exists for itself or an abstract concept, this “thing in itself” is not just “in itself” but also “in me”—in my consciousness or in the consciousness in which it exists. The “referent” (the thing) is always, then, something *referred* for our language, to which we can add the consciousness that we are referring to it (to the referred “referent”). This referent to which we refer is not the phoneme, nor the mere concept; it is the thing individualized in experience itself. You do not have to be an ingenuous “realist” to realize that human language is more than a system of signs, far less a mere instrument. Indeed, to use language as an instrument we need language itself. The referred in language (the word) cannot become *totally* independent of the referent (the thing), nor the referent from the referencer (the speaker). Intentionality, like the indeterminate relationships of Heisenberg, modifies its object. Of course, the word is not the thing, but without a word (about the thing), the thing in question does not exist. If a “thing” is unknown and unnameable, then it “exists” as unknown and unnameable.

*Kein ding sei wo das wort gebricht.*

Nothing exists where the word is lacking . . .

. . . in the words of the poet Stefan George, later ingeniously quoted by Martin Heidegger.

As I have tried to explain, Speaking is a mediator between Thinking and Being. Being lives in the Word, and the Word is the home of Thought. Being speaks and Thought listens. This is the triad that goes beyond Parmenides’s equation of Thinking and Being—with the mediation of the Word. The three (Being-Speaking-Thinking) are inseparable, but we can distinguish between them—with Thought. Through language we speak about our experience, and this language, however much it may adopt an intentionality transcending our language and our mind, is language

(and not meaningless verbosity) because it is directed toward a referent to which we refer—although we can and should distinguish the saying from the said (the referred referent). Experience is not its language, but Man (*Homo loquens*) cannot live without the *logos*—and neither can God. The silence of the Father is incarnated in the Word. One does not exist without the other, by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, to use Trinitarian language. “If the Word (*śabda*) speaks, how can it be false (*mythā*)?” says Śābarācārya, the first commentator on the *mīmāṃsā* in the fifth century; his work, in fact, could be quite illuminating on this subject.

There should be no need to underline the fact that when we say “word,” we do not intend it as a simple arbitrary sign, nor as the thing itself (in itself). The true word is a mediator (as *logos*) and not only an intermediary. “We shall be judged for our language,” says the Gospel. If we become conscious of an experience, the thought is concomitant with the word that stutteringly reveals it. The word is inseparable not only from its meaning but also from its sound, its body, and its music. The mothers of deepest Africa teach their children to sing before they can speak, and generally the child will understand the music of a word before knowing its meaning. Everything depends on the tone in which things are said. Writing has many technical advantages, but it cannot replace oral culture; the Egyptians discovered this, as we have already mentioned. The word, like music, is immediate, and any translation is reductive. We need to listen to the word, and by listening, learn it. The word is word only when it is pronounced, heard, and understood—that is, when it is incarnated in us. There exist false “spiritualisms” that deny incarnation. And this is also the danger of a certain mysticism that, while always trying to push “further on,” leaves behind “true reality” (*satyasya satyam*).

We have already mentioned that language is not experience, but language conceals and reveals it—the “shepherd of Being” as Heidegger calls it. Silence exists, but it does not stand alone or exist alone: it is in a dual relation with the word. It exists in union with the word; the two coexist. The Word is mediator and not intermediary; “it is the firstborn of reality,” say the *Vedas*; it is the biblical *dabar*; it was “with God,” says St. John; it is the *ḥaqīqāt mohammadiya* (eternal reality or theophany) of Muslim tradition; all of these, of course, are homeomorphic equivalents. Many of the sufferings of mystics are the birth pains of the word, starting with mystical silence; they partake in the birth of Creation, to echo the words of St. Paul.

The language of mysticism is in a continuous process of self-disqualification: *neti, neti* (that is not it, that is not it). But if we ask what it *is*, we just get the repeated answer that it is not this or that. Mystical language is apophatic, even in its cataphatic form. It is not just a nonknowing, an ignorance (*agnosia*), or a silence (*tuṣṇim*); it is the discovery that the word can reveal only through silence: it is the silence of the word (subjective genitive) that the mystic captures in the word itself. It is the “silence of the truth,” according to the African mystic St. Augustine. To capture its silence, however, it is necessary to speak, just as when music stops we have a greater sense of its absence, and the silent pauses are indeed part of it. Music, like the word, needs silence. There is a polarity between the two: once again it is *advaita*.



Here I would add an important word of caution on language, especially in those cultures that are in danger of losing their oral tradition in favor of the written culture. Primordial language is not conceptual, but symbolic. The language that expresses our *E* is the symbol.

Unlike the concept, the symbol is not just an intermediary between reality and our understanding of it. The symbol is the mediator between our consciousness and reality. As we have already said, the symbol overcomes the epistemic dichotomy between the subject (knower, lover, feeler) and the object (known, loved, felt). What is symbolized is in the symbol itself. For this reason, the symbol is a symbol only for those who have discovered it as such. The symbol presupposes experience. You need to be able to read the writing, listen to the word, decipher physical nature, and love the symbol. When Man or a people is deprived of language, the aspect of mystery that it could have revealed is cancelled. There exist linguistic genocides.

### *Memory*

Experience is ineffable, but we shall continue talking about it. When we live an experience we are conscious of it, but we do not usually reflect upon it immediately—although sometimes, as with sensory experience, the reflection on it may seem to be simultaneous. When I prick my finger on a rosebush, I realize it immediately. When I am enchanted while gazing on a rose, my consciousness of being enchanted is not necessarily simultaneous. When I catch a glimpse of the glory of the Creator and the Creation in the rose, the ecstasy of what I have seen and felt has to subside before I can realize it fully. The disciples of Emmaus remembered afterward that their hearts burned within them on the journey home. In simple terms, when we live an experience, its permanence in our memory (*m*) allows us to speak of it, as many mystics have confirmed. I prefer to use “memory” in its generic sense, which covers both the memory itself (*anamnēsis*) and the faculty (*mnēmē*), without going further into the issue at this point. The analyses of Bergson could be very useful in describing the fundamental role of memory. We have already made reference to the quotation, “Whoever *sees* me [remembers that he] *has seen* the Father.” What we are interested in now is the role of mediation of the memory in the act of “becoming conscious” of our experience. Reflection is an act of memory.

The reflexive consciousness of the experience is itself a factor that lasts in our memory, sometimes leaving a lasting mark. We do not need to spend much time here on the fourfold role of memory. On the one hand, it allows us to speak of experience, while on the other it deforms, or at least transforms, the experience, since memory is mediated not only by what is recalled but also by its interpretation, with which prior memories may also be involved. Memory, however, also performs a third function: it can allow us to relive the experience. After getting over the pain of hearing of a friend’s death, I go to give my condolences to his widow and, remembering the event, I go back and relive the experience I had on hearing of his death and weep again with his widow. Classic examples of mediation would be remembering an episode

from the life of Christ and reenacting it in our memory as though we were there at the time, or visualizing a Tibetan goddess, standing in her presence, and listening to her message. The role of an angel, especially in Islam, is to be the messenger that speaks to our memory.

It is obvious that experience, passing through the mediation of memory, brings with it the memory of prior experiences, albeit in a filtered way, and in some traditions these prior experiences are not limited to the rememberings of one individual life. Clearly the mediation of memory can also change the original experience in the very act of remembering the experience, by causing it to be relived in a different way. In the condolences example, it could also happen that there is a juxtaposition between the original memory of the pain on hearing the news of the friend's death and a new impression aroused by the present moment—for instance, the thought that the sick friend is no longer suffering. In this case the memory can return to the mind and generate a new experience.

The memory function also has a fourth role. Not only does it modify our experience, but it also relativizes it by introducing the factor of time. The memory of experience shows us that, notwithstanding a certain atemporality of all experiences, time is not an extrinsic factor. When an experience of youth is recalled in old age, the subject of the experience is no longer the same, and therefore the experience relived is different. The experience remembered is not the original experience. Time and space are physical as well as anthropological categories. We do not live in neutral and external times and spaces, since we ourselves are temporal and spatial, and so our experiences cannot be abstracted from space or time. This is another reason why the question of whether mystical experiences are the same or different in different people or religions is a purely formal one that takes away from experience all that makes it real. "If I had been Śaṅkarākarya when his mother died . . .," is a formal construct that does not allow me to extrapolate what I would have done, since I (inseparably from "my circumstances") am not in fact the disciple of Govinda. Every experience is nontransferable because it is inseparable from the subject that lives it; this does not mean, however, that a community, for example, may not be the subject of a collective experience.

We have seen how memory and interpretation are not separable. We should add straight away that, in memory as in its interpretation, the human body, in all its psychosomatic complexity, has a role to play. Biological reductionism is one thing; quite another is the abstraction of the important role of our body in all that we are discussing. The works of Merleau-Ponty on perception are very relevant in this regard. Mysticism cannot be reduced to pure psychology, but neither should neurophysiology be simply ignored. In the field of mysticism, one cannot deny the importance of the more modern studies, despite their potential reductionism. An example would be so-called transpersonal psychology.

Every human experience, no matter how "mystical," is a bodily experience, even though sometimes we are not aware of the fact, and we should not confuse the bodily with the sensory. Spirituality also has a sensory aspect. As we shall have occasion to

repeat, human experience is threefold, but this classification is not a division into static compartments. The divisions are our interpretations. There is no doubt that there exist *memories* of out-of-body experiences by those in whom the memory of the bodily participation is absent. Nonetheless the body, albeit in a deathlike state, is there—despite the fact that some of its vital functions are suspended.

### *Interpretation*

By *interpretation* (ṭ), we do not necessarily mean a new hermeneutics on the esoteric, metaphysical, analogical, or any other kind of meaning of experience, but rather the primary interpretation of what we could call its literal sense. To put it another way, interpretation is the common mediator of each and every factor of experience. For example, the memory, which we have just described, is always an interpreted memory; that is, it is subject to a certain intelligibility in order to be meaningful. It goes without saying that any interpretation is made as a function of our hermeneutical categories taken together, which are in turn a result of the time-space in which we not only live but indeed exist, and of the culture that has formed us. As we said in the case of memory, any one experience in any one person is interpreted differently over the years—and what appeared to us, for example, to come from outside we actually interpret as a product of our unconscious (which has no reason to exclude a more extrinsic cause). We remember it, then, as a different experience because we interpret it in a different way.

The word “interpretation,” when speaking of experience, is a double-edged sword. In general we tend to take hermeneutics, both textually and practically, to mean something objectifiable, and therefore in a certain sense nonmodifiable. So when we modify the interpretation of a text we refer to the context. When we modify the interpretation of an experience, on the other hand, it is not objective, and the subject is not immutable. We could say, therefore, that in some way what we have called the first interpretation of the experience belongs, in any case, to the experience itself. We can distinguish the interpretation from the experience, but we cannot separate them. No matter how much a psychiatrist may tell me there is nothing offensive in the behavior of my friend, if I interpret that my friend has behaved badly toward me, then I shall continue to feel offended. However much theologians may assure me that the Dea Kālī or the Virgin Mary has not visited me, the interpretation that I give to my experience belongs to it. And again, if the psychiatrist convinces me that my friend behaved properly toward me, or if the theologian demonstrates that there cannot have been an visit by the Dea or the Virgin, then my new interpretation of the experience changes the experience itself. And if the experience should repeat itself, I will no longer believe I am seeing Kālī or the Virgin, but that it is only an appearance, or at most an apparition.

To repeat: Interpretation is not experience; moreover, one experience may have different interpretations by the same subject. But there is no consciousness of an experience without interpretation. Phenomenology itself is nothing more than an

interpretation that has eliminated elements that the phenomenologist considers would have clouded the "pure manifestation" of the phenomenon itself.

This is worth stating, because there may be not only false interpretations but also experiences that are not susceptible to rational interpretations. And again, in general, every experience is resistant to such interpretations. In a certain sense, any experience reveals its authenticity to the extent that we cannot interpret it exhaustively. Every experience is primary and, as such, not reducible to its interpretation.

In our time, so much has been written on hermeneutics that we can spare ourselves more time on it here. We should just add that an ideal interpretation of an experience would make itself invisible, managing to identify itself with the experience itself, and make us believe that the experience is not modified. Thus, the believer in our example, if he allows himself to be convinced by the expert, will not believe he has seen the Virgin Mary in the flesh, or Kālī, the Śakti of Śiva, but that what he saw is a simple apparition, and is only real as such.

We can also add that when people speak about hermeneutics, it is usually reduced to the interpretation of dreams and especially texts. A case in point is the interpretation of mystical texts, whether they are written by authors, inspired by a superhuman author, or indeed authorless, like the *apauruṣeyatva* of the *Vedas*. Here a plurality of meanings is allowed and indeed justified, since the intention of the inspired text cannot be wholly grasped by any human intellect. We need only consider the complex *mīmāṃsā* philosophy in its interpretation in the *Vedas*, the diverse Christian interpretations of Scripture or a phrase by the last of the Fathers of the Western Church (St. Gregory the Great): "Verba sacri eloqui [...] *iuxta sensum legentium per intellectum crescunt*" (The words of the Holy Scripture [...] grow according to what the readers understand of them"). In any case, reading (interpretation) can give rise to a new experience.

In general, modern hermeneutics aims to explain the rational animal, which is supposedly Man, so that he can "understand" experience. Let us take an example.

The modern mentality, influenced by the experimental method to which modern science has accustomed us, limits itself to the interpretation of *how* a physical body was formed (H<sub>2</sub>O, for instance), and no longer asks *what* that body is. Knowledge of *how* a phenomenon came about has replaced the knowledge of what the phenomenon *is*. Modern interpretation is too often satisfied with an explanation of the genesis of the phenomenon. This is the root of the convincing power of the theory of evolution: by knowing *how* something came to be, it seems to us that we have an insight into what that thing *is*. Here experience is confused with its interpretation, and interpretation with knowledge of its genesis. To put it simply, this is abstaining from experience—to such a degree that in the effort to know what Man *is* we forget to ask who we *are*. Thus we are happy to learn that we are *descended* from apes. Much as I do not believe I am descended from apes, I cannot confuse my experience as a human with the knowledge of my supposed origins. Undoubtedly, knowing what I was will help me understand aspects of my being, but I must not confuse this with the experience of what I am.

In summary, to understand any fact we first of all have to record it in our consciousness as that particular fact, with the mediation of the first interpretation. Then straight away we have to place it in relation with something already known that can serve as intermediary—with something that we accept as already assimilated. Neither the first nor the second interpretation, however, is the experience. The first interpretation presents the fact as such; the second introduces what has been interpreted into the baggage of personal and collective understanding of the world we live in. And that is our next point.

### *Reception*

By *reception* (*r*) we mean the cultural framework in which all the previous operations are performed. Both the language we use and the interpretation of our experiences, which influence the memory we have of them, depend upon our interaction with our cultural world. Man can and must be himself, but this "self" is not the isolated individual; "circumstances" also belong to his being. Consciousness of experiences depends on a whole collection of factors that we have defined as the cultural framework in which we live. It all influences how we live our experiences. We will not see the calm and merciful hand of Kālī if we have never heard her name. We are unlikely to ask *what* Man is if we consider it sufficient just to know *how* he got here. We are conditioned by the real-world culture in which we live. A side effect of the information overload that afflicts modern Man is the drastic modification of our field of perception, both because the level of saturation and the aggressiveness of news information, especially visual news, damage our sensitivity and also because its basic uniformity limits our freedom of expression: we have to follow the prevailing model or risk not being understood. It is significant that the poetic language of mystics lasts longer than the pretentiously clear language of the prevailing culture, which changes from generation to generation. It is also true, however, that the interpretation of mystical language as a series of poetic licenses and metaphors, rather than an existential examination of our lives and our way of looking at the world, has made it easier to tolerate and therefore allowed it to survive in our mechanized world. This is a historical irony.

### *Actualization*

By *actualization* (*a*) we refer to the existential factor of every experience: its active translation, its expression in life, its power to transform, its manifestation in practice. There is a fundamental difference between a purely "mental" construct and an experience. It is striking, and a peculiar sign of our times, that the Greek word *theoreia*, translated by Cicero as *contemplatio*, has been discredited to such a degree that we generally use it to refer to a quasi-sterile mental operation with no strength, and we interpret it as a mere ("theoretical") lucubration without practical influence or ramifications—where, by "practical," we mean pertaining to real human life.

The ultimate cause of this can be found in the divorce we have already mentioned between knowledge and love. In fact, any "knowledge" without love can be defined as intellectual or philosophical, limited to establishing relationships and finding theoretical links between different thoughts, but with little or no relevance either for the life of the particular individual or for human existence—unless people actually incarnate those ideas in their experience. This degrades philosophy to a pure *opus rationis*, from the moment it is separated from its mystical dimension, and the degradation is due to the cultural dichotomy between knowledge and love that in these *sūtras* we are trying to overcome. Marx's well-known phrase about changing the world and not just interpreting it illustrates the mortal rift between theory and practice, since any practice that does not come from theory is ineffective, if not counterproductive, and any theory that is not reflected in practice is sterile, if not downright wrong. Once again we have a-duality. In the end it is neither a question of true theory nor of genuine practice.

"*Natura non facit saltus*" (Nature does not make leaps), wrote Leibniz (although some attribute the phrase to Linneo) in what was to become a "dogma" until the discovery of quantum energy by Planck in 1900—though in fact modern *physics*, despite its name, does not deal with nature (φύσις, *physis*) but rather with energy, and is now well beyond quantum theory. Certainly, rationalizing reason does not proceed by leaps; it proceeds *by composing and dividing*, as the Scholastics used to say. It is when the intellect allows itself to be fertilized by love that it makes real leaps—even if they then have to be "confirmed." Experience certainly moves at a pace through to the actualization of its practice—bypassing rational continuity and finding its authenticity in action. This is where we see the creativity of experience—and its danger, too, because it can transform our lives.

We have just mentioned *action* as a constitutive part of experience. We may take this word as a synonym of actualization, which has more archaic and philosophical overtones. We have chosen it over "activity" so as to avoid an "activist" interpretation of "action," but both words refer to the existential nature of experience. There is a Castilian proverb that says, "The real works are loves and not good reasons." In more philosophical language, we could say that experience is an existence before it is an essence.

This is the existential nature of experience, and it allows us to say that reason alone is not experience because it is limited to finding links between ideas by deduction, induction, extrapolation, and suggestion. Undoubtedly we can have an intellectual experience when we let it be infused with love—which often takes the form of (intellectual) passion.

Clearly we should add straight away that when an idea is charged with truth, whatever anyone says, it will take shape in people's lives sooner or later. "Any truth, whoever says it, comes from the Holy Spirit," said the Christians of the first century, until truth was taken prisoner by reason. But it is hard to imagine that an idea could contain such a weight of truth if the truth itself was not being lived by the person formulating it or did not fall on fertile ground. It is written that the criterion of truth is what makes us free—and freedom is manifested in action.

And so the basic function of experience becomes clear: it changes our lives. I say our lives and not our reactions, which are more or less conditioned by the stimuli of a mechanized society. This also underlines the importance of experience, since it can also be negative and destructive. The active and existential nature of experience is illustrated by its diversity compared to mere "theory" (again in its narrower sense). A person does not act, let alone die, for a doctrine alone. The martyrs of so many traditions were not simply fanatics. One can be a martyr for an experience; an experience can change our lives, and also our bodies.

This, I emphasize, is the test of the authenticity of experience: it has vital repercussions on our existence and transforms our lives; it flows into the circling torrent of a person's life and, depending on its depth and quality (which in turn depends on the purity of the subject), penetrates the Mystical Body of reality.

In other words, an important feature of experience is its integration in life: "*Experience* is the mother of *science*," as an old Castilian saying goes. We could add to that, "Only those who feel this can say it."

In the introduction to this *sūtra* we said that if *e* is reduced to zero then everything falls apart, and we said the same for all the other factors. In any case it seems an appropriate thing to highlight in this last case, too. If human experience is not manifested in action (life, activity, change . . .), that is to say, if *a* is zero, then there is no experience (*E*). Everything will have been a sterile cogitation, and our interpretations will be baseless. We must emphasize this last factor because too often mystical experience has been dissociated from the social, political, and indeed corporeal aspects of human life.

Almost all cultures speak of Man as "noble," "superior," "anointed" (confirmed in grace), "freed in life," "risen" and so on. We need to avoid an Apolline or aestheticist vision of human life where it is as though the lame, the neurotic, or the blind cannot achieve a mystical experience, or enter the Kingdom of Heaven, as the Gospel says. But we also need to avoid the Dionysian vision that confused liberty with libertarianism. In the language of the Gospel, we must repent (*metanoia*). "Faith, if good deeds do not go with it, is quite dead," says St. James the apostle.

We might well have defined the *a* of our formula as *amor* (love), because love is action; love is the centrifugal tendency of our being that drives us toward transcendence—toward the other and the you—just as knowledge is the complementary movement of our being that draws us to immanence, assimilation, and comprehension. However, in order to articulate this idea we need a tripartite anthropology that the modern world has lost—and that urgently needs to be rediscovered, as we shall implicitly propose in the next *sūtra*.

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*In summary:* Human experience is like the multicolored rays that converge into a bright, blinding white light; it is simple because it gathers the multiple dimensions of Man into a single human *perichoresis*, which involves our body, our soul, and our spirit and puts us in contact with Life and reality.

### Sūtra 8: We Are Aware of a Threefold Experience: Sensory, Intelligible, and Spiritual

The experience *E* of which we are conscious is manifested through a threefold mediation—although we may then interpret these mediations in very different forms.

Virtually all traditions recognize that Man possesses three organs with which to enter into contact with reality, rather like three windows that open on the world—not only the outside world but also the inner one. These are the senses, the mind, and the spiritual sense. We could describe them, perhaps, as three doors through which we go in and out of the outside world, and through which the outside world comes in and out of our inner selves—independently of the correlation between microcosm and macrocosm: the communication itself is made possible and manifested through such a correlation. This threefold distinction corresponds to the traditional tripartite anthropology in which Man is constitutionally body, soul, and spirit and thereby present in three worlds: the material or sensory, the mental or intellectual, and the spiritual or divine—although it has to be said that in this field there is significant ambiguity in the terminology. Independently of the words used, however, this point requires more clarification. It is not so much the fact that the “three worlds” (those of matter, the consciousness, and the divine) converge in Man, but that these “three worlds” are pure divisions made by Man because he encounters them both inside and outside himself; they are projections of what Man is in his entirety (of the *puruṣa*, the cosmic Man, as the *Vedas* would put it). They are real projections because reality allows it—“*cum fundamento in re*,” as the Scholastics would say—but nevertheless projections. Reality is “one without a second one” (“*ekam eva advitīyam*”); we have suggested this by quoting an *Upaniṣad*, but we could just as easily have quoted St. Ambrose, who says literally the same thing, “*Ergo unus et non est secundus*” (Therefore one and there is no second one). He had earlier explained, “*Nullus ergo secundus; quia principium omnium Trinitas est*” (With no second, because the beginning of all things is the Trinity).

Man is an image of reality, just as reality is an image of Man. The relationship is mutual. The classic biblical *imago Dei* works both ways: God is also *imago hominis*. Following the Greek tradition we could call these three dimensions of reality (and of man) *ta aisthēta*, *ta noēta*, *ta mystika* (the sensory, the mental, and the mystical). In the Vedāntic tradition we should say, *ādhibautika*, *ādhyātmika*, *ādhidaivika* (the referent to things, to the *ātman* and to the divine)—straying a little from the strict academic meaning of the words. We could also call these three dimensions the three paths of Man, the triadic *empeiria* (experience) or the three senses that correspond to the three paths of many schools of spirituality: the purgative, the illuminative, and the unitive. It is interesting to note that the metaphor speaks of three senses: the corporeal (or material), the mental (or intellectual), and the spiritual (or divine)—all three sensitive to their respective “organs.” We have just mentioned the correlation between anthropology and spirituality (religion): the purgative life that calls for the submission of the senses corresponds to the body; to the soul, the illumination of



the mind, so that it perceives what is super-sensory; and to the spirit, the union with the fullness of Being, generally referred to as Divinity or another equivalent name. It is not surprising that, with the bipartite anthropology in vogue in the Western post-“modern” world, the third path, which is mysticism par excellence, has lost its anthropological foundation and been reduced, at best, to a peak along the illuminative path. But mysticism cannot be reduced to mere knowledge, however “illuminated” it may be, because it is also love and action (*jñāna*, *bhakti*, and *karman*).

It is important to underline both the distinction between the three senses and also their inseparability. They are not to be confused: sensory knowledge is neither mental (intellectual) nor spiritual, and the latter two are also distinct. But the three senses are inseparable, despite the fact that at times one or other of them may be somewhat decayed. The medieval Christian tradition, like the Buddhist and others (albeit with different terminologies), speaks of the three eyes (*oculus carnis*, *oculus mentis*, and *oculus fidei*). We should not forget that we are speaking about three senses and of a threefold experience (ἐμπειρία, *empeiria*). Before Western rationalism entered into Christian theology, faith was considered an experience and not just a trusting of the witness of others; it was the “life of the soul”: “*Fides enim est vita animae*,” as the Angelic Doctor wrote in his *Summa Theologiae*. To repeat: Any “vision” seen by only one eye deforms reality, because in the final analysis it only grasps what falls into its visual field; it does not grasp the whole reality, as it were. The reduction of mysticism to the vision of the third eye is what has caused its bad reputation in many circles. If sensist (materialist) reductionism comes from looking only with the first eye and idealist reductionism with the second, then pseudomysticism is the exclusive vision of the third eye. Any monocultural vision lacks perspective. When the Latin mystics used the expression *fides oculata*—seeing faith (with eyes)—there were some who were referring only to the third eye, while others meant a complete vision of reality, which is not complete without the third eye, but requires the other two as well. This is why so many contemplative mystics were men of action. They did not believe in the dichotomy between action and contemplation or in the dualism between knowledge and love.

Having said that, we can make two relevant observations. The first is that one cannot in any way claim that the “vision” of the three senses exhausts reality, so to speak—that with our three senses we “capture” all reality, though the word “all” is itself a mental extrapolation. We have no other language, and language is constitutively open—on both sides, as a Trinitarian vision would have it. The *logos* proceeds from the Father (it is begotten by him, in the traditional metaphor) and moves toward the Spirit; it is a mediator in both directions. The *perichōrēsis* is circular: the mediator is himself mediated, too.

It is significant that most of the traditions of India, including Buddhism and Jainism, speak of a plurality of interrelated senses. Thus the classic Buddhist text of the *Abhidharma Kośa* describes twenty-two senses, which, besides the bodily ones, include pleasure, satisfaction, equanimity, faith, strength, memory, rapture, and discernment, while also mentioning the sense of realizing what one knows and the

sense of the unknown, among others. The senses are called *indriya*, from the God Indra, whose principal characteristics are those of strength, vigor, and power.

These senses, in keeping with the Indic tradition itself, can be grouped together as the triad of the three *guṇa*, or qualities, of Man as well as of Being: *tamas*, *rajas*, and *sāttva* (darkness/inertia, activity/passion, and goodness/purity), to which corresponds the classical division of *adhibhautika*, *ādhidaivika*, and *ādhyātmika*; these in turn correspond respectively to physical or material, celestial or cosmic, and spiritual or divine realities—although the three interpenetrate each other.

Rather than speaking of the three eyes, three groups of senses, or three forms of knowledge, we could also have said three loves or three ways of feeling or touching reality. There would then be three sentiments, with sentiment being the basic metaphor. Once again, knowledge or intellection and sentiment or love cannot be separated, but must be distinguished (through knowledge). And by saying there is no knowledge without love, and vice versa, we are equally saying that there is no knowledge without sentiment, without the essential involvement of the senses—not only as the raw material to be elaborated by knowledge, but also as an essential factor in human life. Mysticism does not split Life up—although at times a surgical incision, albeit provisional, may be useful. St. Thomas Aquinas, on the subject of the *illuminatio intellectus* (a work of the Word) and the *inflammatio affectus* (a work of the Spirit), wrote that “*una non potest esse sine alia*” (the one cannot be without the other), given that the divine persons are not separate, nor are they separable (except by abstraction).

In the classical definition of mysticism—*cognitio Dei experimentalis*—the adjective “experiential” underlines precisely the idea of loving knowledge, as the author must surely have meant, since he believed that “God is Love.” Knowledge, in fact, requires co-naturality with the known—and the known in this case is Love. St. Bonaventure’s phrase has its fulfillment in the expression of another mystic, Spinoza, who speaks of the *amor Dei intellectualis*. If we overlook this intimate relation between *amor Dei* and *cognitio Dei*, then we will understandably have some difficulty in reconciling the “microdoxical” interpretation of rigid monotheism with the experience of some mystics, who have felt the “immensity of God” who is everywhere *per essentiam*, *potentiam et praesentiam* (to quote another of the Scholastics); they are not content with a “rational knowledge of a Supreme Being” that alienates them from the world. When they embrace creation within the experience of God they are accused of pantheism—and they take refuge in apophatism as an anchor for their orthodoxy. I have decided to call this reductive interpretation of the *doxa* “microdoxy.”

The three senses are inseparable, in that if separated they give us a distorted vision of reality. Here again, the *advaita* and the Trinitarian experiences give us the key to interpreting the whole of reality—which I have called cosmotheandric. It is a triple dimension, constitutive of reality, and therefore equally real in its three dimensions. In reality there is nothing that prevails. The senses do not dominate Man, as materialists claim; nor does the mind dominate sensuality, as Plato would have it; nor indeed does the eye of faith dominate the eye of the intellect, as a certain

medieval Christian school would wish. A natural harmony exists among these three faculties, organs, or dimensions of reality.

This does not mean that the harmony cannot be broken. Here we face the problem of evil, which must be mentioned, even though we can only deal with it in passing. The harmony is lost when there is a disturbance of the hierarchy—that is, the “sacred order” intrinsic to reality itself—since everything is interlinked to everything else, as in the Trinitarian *perichōrēsis*. As we have said before, the hierarchy is not to be understood in the sense that there is one organ (eye, dimension, or faculty) that is superior to another. Superiority or inferiority would imply a scheme external to the three orders that enables them to be compared, but such an external scheme does not exist. In the Trinity, for example, no one is superior to another because there are not three independent substances, but rather a mutual relationship of inter-independence. Every being is unique and therefore incomparable. Beings can only be compared from an external point of view (strength, weight, utility . . .). We state once again that, in order to discover the uniqueness of any being, we must love that being, and to do that we must put it in relation with ourselves and with Everything.

Once again, the expression “mystical experience” gives rise to a *misleading ambivalence*: it can mean the experience of reality as seen by the third eye, or the vision that, without excluding the third eye, integrates the vision of the other two as well.

The *first case* is one of reductionism just as fatal as materialist or idealist reductionism—even though strictly the three eyes cannot be separated. What happens is that priority is given to the sensory experience, or to the intellectual or the spiritual, and reality is interpreted under the prism of one of the eyes alone, to the detriment of the other two. All the same, even the most materialistic person still has to express himself in concepts, just as even the most spiritual person cannot completely ignore his (sensual) body—notwithstanding Porphyry, who claims that his teacher Plotinus was ashamed (αἰσχυνομένω, *aischynomenō*) to be in a body.

In the *second case*, experience is equivalent to what I have called cosmotheandric intuition, which attempts to embrace reality as a whole, without splitting it into parts—although concepts, as abstractions, do allow classifications. Concepts have an important heuristic role but do not touch reality even in their intentionality, which goes only to the intelligible nucleus of the real. The concept does not touch the body or what is individual, far less what is unique.

In accordance with this second interpretation, which is the one we shall adopt, every person is potentially a mystic insofar as every human being is capable of discovering the whole of reality in each of its constituent parts. As it was once put, “The mystic is not a special class of person, but every person is a special class of mystic” (David Streindl-Rast).

We can note, albeit incidentally, the power of metaphors. Is it a “leap to Everything” or a “descent to Nothing”? Is it an uphill journey toward Transcendence or a downhill path toward Immanence? The two metaphors are complementary and come together in their respective impossibility: if we made the leap, Transcendence would cease to be such, while if the descent were real, then Immanence would disappear.

Neither the experience of Transcendence nor that of Immanence can be a merely mental experience; they require love. We need to come out of ourselves: the object as such is not in me (*ob-iectum*). But my knowledge requires me to assimilate it—that is, to convert it into subject (*sub-iectum*)—and for this reason I must love it as well. When the subject touches the object there is neither immanence nor transcendence, separated or inseparable. To be more precise: it needs the complete act of Man, the threefold *empeiria*, an experience that is corporeal, mental, and spiritual—once again, in an *advaita* union.

At this point a clarification is needed. We have said that the authentic mystical experience is not merely sensual, exclusively intellectual, nor solely spiritual; but neither is it the sum of these three experiences. Religious literature, whether referring to initiation or to the sacraments or to the ascetic life, speaks often of “breaking the mold” or of “different levels” of spiritual life and of reality. There is no doubt of that. The mystical ascent is a steep one, with steps and straight places and also ontic levels. But every step supports the next, so if we suppress the previous level, everything collapses. The “mystical flight” is an inadequate metaphor because it may make us think we can get away from what is earthly, whereas in order to fly we need the atmosphere of the earth, which actually offers resistance to the wings, making flight possible. It is not a flight, but a path—which is where men tread. Flying is not natural for men. Furthermore, the reality that mystical experience touches is not the “higher” level, nor is it reached with the sum of the three experiences; experience is a single act. What happens is that often one of the eyes is asleep. It is no coincidence that many mystical texts speak about staying awake. All the same, it is natural that the steps do not seem like steps when seen from above, since the top step covers the one below it. This explains the fact that a true master just holds out his hand as if on a flat path, whereas to the disciple it feels like a leap up to another level.

The mark of a true master is the pedagogical corollary. The master does not teach in the literal sense: he shows, makes a sign; he does not violate, but communicates. Christ called his disciples friends (φίλους, *philous*). Those who have reached the “seventh mansion” do not feel superior, and “the rivers go back to being rivers and the mountains mountains, for having found his ox the oxherd goes back to the market happy to buy himself something to eat,” as the famous works of Zen spirituality describe. The risen Christ, in fact, does not do a great deal of preaching, but eats some fish that he himself prepared with his disciples; and in the prayer he taught us he did not forget to mention “our daily bread.”

The mystical life is not a simple experience of the human mind, as some works on mysticism would have us believe, although we do have to use the mind to reflect on it.

The human mind can only understand by arriving at the *reductio ad unum*, that is to say, by making the different data of consciousness converge as one; otherwise intelligibility cannot be achieved. We cannot intend two things at one time without reducing them to a unity that is prior, deeper, or higher. Mystical experience, on the other hand, is more, not less, than mere rational evidence; it does not reduce everything to a Unity (whether divine or of Being). The *One* of a given mysticism is

not numerical unity—that would be monism. Many mystics speak of Union (which is the path of love) and not of Unity (which would make the lovers disappear). The consummated Union is Unity, but first it is Duality. It follows that much depends on the level at which we are speaking. The human mind can comprehend unity and move toward Duality only dialectically, considering the poles one at a time (*sic et non*)—or on a journey toward an eschatological unity. In order to avoid dialectics, some mystical schools prefer to speak of Uniqueness, which, depending on how it is interpreted, makes one of the lovers disappear. Thus there remains only pure Love that loves itself (*amans seipsum*); with this, either Unity is destroyed or Love is eliminated—or the *seipsum* is Trinitarian, as St. Augustine suggested. The Absolute cannot love, because it would lose its absolute Independence; at best it may be loved—Aristotle's ὡς ἐρώμενον (*hōs erōmenon*), later copied by certain Scholastics, which is forced to negate the ultimate reality of the Incarnation so as not to stain the divine "Absoluteness." Clearly the Trinity we have mentioned is neither One nor Three. The Trinity is radical relativity.

Strictly speaking, the word "uniqueness" signifies a nature that is unique, or irreducible to anything else and therefore incomparable. We cannot therefore say if there are either one or two lovers (in our example). The unique is not countable. Reality is unique not only as a concept but as reality. If there were a "super-reality" it would be the true reality. We cannot think of two uniquenesses, unless we think of them as two species of a common genus. But then we cannot think of *one* Uniqueness either, because one is only meaningful by its distinction from two.

Let us emphasize then: The structure of experience is neither single nor three-fold. The "three" senses are related to one another, as in the Trinitarian *perichōrēsis*. Our mind cannot embrace them all in one go—but neither can it reduce the three dimensions to one, since they are distinct: "*quasi sit rota in medio rotae*" (as though there were one wheel inside another), as medieval scholars interpreted the prophecy of Ezekiel in one of their Latin texts. Could it then be an irrational experience, since it cannot be underpinned by a postulate of reason?

We come back once again to the *confusing ambivalence* of the expression, "mystical experience." If by mystical experience we mean the only experience that opens us up to the third eye, then we must have recourse to a dualist cosmology on two levels: the level of reason or nature and the supernatural level or level of grace, in which reason remains *aufgehoben* in the Hegelian sense (rejected, overcome, accepted, and conserved). In this case, the mystical experience would represent a higher stage to which one can progress only by special "grace"—which is given to many or to few according to destiny or divine will. This would not be irrational, but superrational, or at least special in some way.

Mystics in the monotheist area tend to belong to this group, but they are not entirely comfortable there. They see God everywhere, which makes them potential pantheists in the eyes of strict monotheists, but deserve huge merit for having broadened and deepened the idea of a God who is not imprisoned on Mount Olympus. However, they also reinforce the dichotomy between natural and supernatural mysticism,

religion and faith, science and theology, civil and religious life, the normal and the paranormal, and so forth. The consequences of this dichotomy can be clearly seen in the past and also today; the world has managed to deprive tolerance of its mystical sense—that of tolerating the incomprehensible or the unacceptable—and without mysticism we arrive at the war of religions. The only path, then, toward “tolerance” is to relegate not only mysticism but also religion to a sphere that is individual and private, and therefore ineffectual in political and social life. If God is a superfluous hypothesis for civil life, not only can we be tolerant, but it also becomes easier to do without him. The “religious” person, therefore, need not be concerned with politics or direct social action; he need not get “involved,” as they say. Religion is ultra-mundane and not concerned with this world; mysticism is supernatural, or at least something quite special: it leaves people “in peace” to get on with their daily lives. It can therefore be tolerated. The mystic, then, would be an expert in his own particular field, just like an expert on, say, invertebrate animals: both very interesting fields and with implications for mankind, but not fundamentally indispensable. This culture of specialization has enjoyed great success, even transforming philosophy into a specialized field of knowledge and religion into another, so that we speak of “nonreligious” people without realizing that it is a meaningless expression, rather like speaking of “nonrational” humans. This sheds light on the much-quoted lines of Goethe:

*Wer Wissenschaft und Kunst besitzt,  
hat auch Religion;  
wer jene beiden nicht besitzt,  
der habe Religion.*

He who possesses science and art  
has also religion;  
but he who does not possess them,  
let him have religion.

Neither philosophy nor religion, in their primeval sense, can be reduced to a specialization. Philosophy is not to be confused with a discipline nor religion with an institution. This issue touches a raw nerve of modernity: specialization as a consequence of the fragmentation of reality, due to the dichotomy between ontology and epistemology. Thus, the knower remains limited to being an individual—though we should note that the alternative is not collectivism.

One particular and very widespread case of this specialization syndrome is the individualist interpretation of mystical experience. The myth of individualism is so deeply rooted in the Western mentality that, even though contemporary “transpersonal psychology” does speak of the transpersonal, the individual is still taken as the starting point. We have not moved on from the individualist notion of the person, which goes back to Boethius. This myth of individualism has virtually

eliminated the Trinity from Christian spirituality. There can only be one God, it is said, thus forgetting the words of St. Augustine, "In the Trinity, he who begins to count begins to err," and the fact that a number applied to God is meaningless. The Trinity does not consist of three divine individuals. Christians are content to be (pseudo-)monotheists because, according to the assumption of individual substance, the Trinity would be an example of tritheism. "One should not argue about names," but it is necessary to clarify their meaning. By person we mean a real knot in a web of relationships. The knot is the individual (not, indeed, to be denied), but the knot without the threads that make it up would cease to exist, to be a knot. And there is not just one knot, just as there cannot exist one single person. It is the person itself that is transindividual.

It would be neither right nor indeed balanced to criticize modern Western individualism while overlooking the almost egoistical solipsism of certain Oriental mysticisms. In the Indic world, for example, perhaps as a reaction to a certain caste mentality, there have emerged radically solipsistic mysticisms. Consider the *kaivalya* ideal of a certain kind of yoga, the *samnyāsa* of certain schools, or "acosmism" as ideals of perfection. Undoubtedly, although mysticism is a child of its time, most mystics balance these limitations with a practice that is complementary, if not contradictory, to theory—and very often the corrective is love. The poets express it best—for instance, once again, Goethe:

*Was auch als Wahrheit oder Fabel  
in tausend Bücher dir erscheint,  
das alles ist ein Turm zu Babel,  
wenn es die Liebe nicht vereint.*

What in a thousand books seems to you  
fable or truth,  
all is a Tower of Babel,  
if it is not united by love.

The alternative to reducing mystical experience to the private sphere is the rediscovery of the "sense of mystery" that accompanies the experience of one's own "contingency," and that is not the diminution of human dignity but the awareness that we "touch" the infinite at a single point (tangent) where we participate in the infinite, as we have already observed. In this touch there is neither toucher nor touched. Rather, there is a certain communion with all reality, and in particular with humanity, that we cannot call mysticism since it is not just a community of ideas or ideals, but a participation (communion) in the experience of Life. This explains, incidentally, how love for God and love for one's neighbor are the same love. It follows that some mystics often give the impression of living in a "numinous," nebulous, nonconcrete sphere that some would call depersonalized, thereby confusing the person with the individual. It is not that the mystic lives in a different world, but

that for the mystic the world possesses a third dimension that the other two eyes do not see. The serenity of a mystic is not the insensitivity found in some imitations.

If we resist turning mysticism into a specialty and take the mystical experience to mean the complete experience as we have described, then the dichotomies mentioned above, which presuppose a cosmological dualism (two worlds), can be overcome without falling into an idealist monism that denies all real diversity, including that of individuals.

This holistic experience is not merely rational, but neither is it therefore irrational. It has to respect the rights of reason and cannot abuse them, but the sphere of reason does not cover all reality—and the mystical experience “sees” this. It is the same as saying that we cannot reduce Man to a “rational animal” without thereby condemning him to be irrational. This is the role of the third eye: the intuition of a reality that cannot be assimilated to reason, but is not in contradiction with it—unless we use the same master (the mind) to judge this vision. We cannot *say* that reality is *contradictory*, far less that it *could* be, since to be *able* to be so it would need the permission of reason, which cannot admit such a possibility (certainly not rationally). Reality, however, is not obliged to respect the principle of noncontradiction—a clear contradiction of Parmenides. And it is mysticism, in fact, that tells us there is something else in reality of which we are aware and that is not subordinate to reason—something “more” that is not adjunctive but constitutive—“like seeing the invisible” (ἀόρατον ὡς ὁρῶν, *aoiaton hōs horōn*), as Scripture describes faith.

The claim that mystical experience is the holistic experience of reality does not in any way imply that it is an abstract experience of Something, separated or not from the world. It means that there is an immediate contact with all reality through a concrete experience, which in some cases may take the form of Good, Truth, Beauty, God, Christ, Justice, Nothingness, and so on. Without debating the different values of these symbols, we simply state the fact that experience must be concrete; that is to say, it must be the experience of a symbol through which we ascend to Everything or descend to the Abyss, which is possible since “all is in relation with all”—as affirmed by the mystics of virtually all traditions. To see God in all things, as some have said, while others see all things in God, and others still avoid the term “God” altogether. The paths are as numerous as the travellers. “There are as many paths toward God as there are hearts of his faithful,” says a *bādh* of the Prophet. While a scientist will see the (divine) Mystery in matter, a theologian will see the Mystery (of matter) contemplating the *theos*, and a historian will experience reality through the vicissitudes of human life, including the experience of Evil—and we have not mentioned more concrete experiences like that of human love, which is clearly the most common case, as the poets so often illustrate. Neither do we claim that these experiences have the same value, since we cannot separate them from their respective contexts and various interpretations. Hindū mysticism, for example, introduces the notion of *iṣṭadevatā* as the concrete symbol of the infinite Divinity; in Byzantine theology this has its homeomorphic equivalent in the icon, although with its monotheistic basis it is less bold. The *iṣṭadevatā* represents the “image of



the invisible God," which is an object of our knowledge that is equally sensible, intellectual, and spiritual—all concentrated in the act of adoration, since outside it the *iṣṭadevatā* is a mere reproduction or an idea. Many images of the Divinity are thrown into the river after they have been worshipped.

Let us repeat that the fragmentation of this experience damages the human experience, but there do exist cases of the mystical experience in more or less latent forms. We can cite two current examples.

The *aesthetic experience* is basically sensory, but also essentially intellectual and eminently spiritual. Beauty emerges principally through the senses, but unless it is impressed on the mind it is not "experienced" as such. Moreover, the attraction and the charm of beauty lead us to the ineffable, the mystery, the mystical; they lead us to the point where the contemplation of beauty transforms and (if I can hazard the term) divinizes us; we feel the mystery of reality, as Plato describes in some of his memorable dialogues. An artist knows this and can taste it. It is a mystical experience when it is a complete contact with the real, as we have said.

Another fundamental example is the *experience of joy*. The specialization we mentioned before allows us to distinguish joy from well-being, from pleasure, from blessing, and so forth. The mystical experience does not confuse these; it is able to distinguish in the mind these different stages, but also to taste them with the body and savor them with the spirit. They are inseparable, but we must distinguish between them. Without the sensual we cannot comprehend intellectual joy, and without that we do not experience spiritual delight. This does not mean that these values do not share a certain ontonomy and also hierarchy. A physical pain is not incompatible with an intellectual joy, just as a certain dullness of the mind may coexist with a spiritual joy. They are interconnected; there is inter-in-dependence between them. Whoever has not experienced physical well-being cannot know—that is, taste—an intellectual joy or a spiritual pleasure. But it is not just a question of their interconnection, rather of their mutual and reciprocal influence on each other. Physical pleasure reaches a surprising density and depth when coupled with the pleasure of the soul and of the spirit, and vice versa; this is not, however, to say that they are all equal or indeed equally indispensable.

Since the mystical experience is an integral experience, it cannot exclude the body, even if it often suppresses it. There is no human experience without involvement of the body. There is no bodily experience without the direct or indirect, greater or lesser, involvement of the senses. The human body is sexual and its sexuality is present in the body, independently of the reduction of the erotic to the genital. In many traditions the divine icon is androgynous, and human love tends toward union precisely because, being human, it is sexual. The symbology of the *lingam* that emerges from the *yoni* and does not penetrate it is highly significant, as is the fact that the divine activity is symbolized in Pārvatī, Śiva's consort, and not in Śiva himself. Śiva and *śakti* are inseparable. It would be equally one-sided if we were to view mysticism as something more natural to woman than to man. The sublimation of human love, described by so many mystics, does not mean

castration, as some exegetics have interpreted it. Without pureness of heart, one cannot speak of mysticism.

Here, too, however, it is categorical to strive for harmony and not to stumble between the negative asceticism that is ashamed of the body and the exaltation of the body as the center of life. Involving the body in the happiness of the spirit and associating the spirit with bodily pleasure is a mystical art. The two cannot be separated. *Beatitudo*, or *ānanda*, is a cosmotheandric experience. It is understandable that today there is a desire to return to the appreciation of the body, as a reaction to dehumanizing spiritualities, but we should add that it would be equally one-sided to separate the soul from the spirit. As the Gospel says, it is from the heart that good and evil come.

It would be wrong to interpret what we have said so far as a denial of the negative side of human existence. What we have said about pleasure can be equally applied to pain and suffering. Those whose mystical sense is more developed will experience greater delight, but also greater suffering. To put it concisely, they live more; they participate more in the human condition without false escape routes. They are more *sensitive* to life, but do not lose their balance—that is, their equanimity. The *bodhisattva* remains voluntarily in this “vale of tears,” but does not lose his sense of joy. As Fray Luis de León wrote,

*¡Oh desmayo dichoso!*  
*¡Oh muerte que das vía!*  
*¡Oh dulce olvido!*

Oh blessed swoon!  
 Oh life-bestowing death!  
 Oh sweet oblivion!

\*

*In summary:* The third eye is indispensable, but sensory experience, just as much as intelligible experience, is an integral part of the complete mystical experience.

Living this threefold experience as a harmonious whole is the great human task in order to reach the “fullness of Man.” Sensitivity is deceptive, and talent alone is not enough; willpower is insufficient; the third eye on its own is misleading; desire is counterproductive. We need a “new innocence,” but moreover we also need grace and freedom. The mystic feels his contingency and his vulnerability; humility comes naturally to him, but so do joy and peace.

The cosmotheandric experience, to which we have alluded, therefore supports this second vision of mysticism as the integral experience of reality. This is what philosophy has claimed in its best moments—albeit in the particular language of the times. Philosophy was considered the art and science of Life, as a contemplative activity, an apprenticeship to Wisdom, and so on. “*Ars Vitae*” (Seneca), “*cultura*

*animi*" (Cicero), "*vera religio*" (Scotus Eriugena), or more recently, "Eigentlicher Zweck alles Philosophierens die intuitio mistica" (the aim of every philosopher is mystical intuition [Nietzsche]), and many more.

I emphasize this point about the mystical experience as an integral experience because it represents a *novum* (albeit a relative one) that corresponds to the emerging awareness of "sacred secularity." The mystical experience is not identical to what some have called "peak experiences," although such phenomena can open the door and resolve our doubts about the possibility of other states of consciousness. The mystical experience, in any case, is more, and not less, than a state of consciousness—it is a (conscious) opening to all reality, as we have said.

It is important to underline this because there are genuinely spiritual people, especially among those who belong to "religious" institutions (whether they be *āśrama* or *saṅgha*, monasteries or convents, fraternities, societies, or any kind of church)—people who sincerely and actively search for perfection, self-realization, illumination, the angelic life, the divine life, or any other name they may choose—who, if they do not reach what they had imagined as their ideal, often fall into disenchantment or delusion, or resignation and loss of joy, or indeed "consolations" and "exclamations." To put it briefly, there is often the expectation of an experience of "theophany," "*nirvāṇa*," "Mount Sinai," or "Damascus," as in the case of St. Paul. Without denying for a moment the importance of these experiences, nor the purification that is achievable through all those "dark nights" of the soul, I contest (that is, I do not accept) that all these psychological states constitute the core of the mystical experience. This position is supported by numerous mystics who have been critical of *siddhi*, apparitions, paranormal phenomena, and indeed miracles. I am not saying that everything is black-and-white, or that we are all mystics. To say we are mystics without knowing it would not be valid, since knowing or not knowing itself belongs to the being of Man. I am saying that the mystical experience embraces the sensory consciousness as much as the intellectual or spiritual in harmonious a-duality—albeit of different levels. The mystical experience occurs in the "depths" of the soul, in the *Urgrund* of our existence, in the *guhā* of our heart (*hṛdaya*) and not at the level of our mind (*manas*). That is why it transforms our life. We know enough about psychology not to confuse this integral experience with projections of our *animus* or of our *anima*. And I am not saying that these psychological experiences can be equated to hallucinogenic sensations. With a bit of fasting, a bit of mortification, and a few suitable techniques we can all see stars—but we will not know how to walk among them. I do not say that the mystical experience belongs to a "superior" order, but that it is at the foundation of a human being's very constitution—although too often our frenetic human life blunts our sensitivity. It is no accident that love is the "first-born of the Gods," and before night falls "we shall be judged in love." Not for nothing the mystic "suffers" all kinds of trial, because he is awakened to Life in life.

We are back at our starting point: mysticism as the full experience of reality. Now we shall deal with some corollaries.

### Sūtra 9: The Mystical Experience Is in Direct Relation to the Totality of the Human Condition

Mysticism is ineffable, but the mystic speaks. Indeed, were he to stay silent, "The stones would speak out," because silence and the word are complementary. I say silence and the word rather than muteness and logorrhea. A word that does not flow from silence is not authentic, and a silence that is not incarnated in the word is incomplete. As we have already said, Speaking is the mediation (not the intermediary) between Thinking and Being. The idea of an exclusively apophatic mysticism does not fit with the mystical vision that sees simultaneously with all three eyes. Mysticism is not a kind of "intimism" all wrapped up in itself. "There are solitary people," says Ecclesiastes. Human communication happens through bread and the word. But it must be an authentic word—that is, the Word that is mediator between Thinking and Being. To put it another way, any word that does not share bread—that does not lead to practice—is not a true word. Action and contemplation cannot be divided.

In the present *sūtra* we shall deal with this relationship, taking as a starting point the interiority that opens us up to the whole world.

The path of mysticism, as we have already suggested, could be summarized in the advice of the Sybil and the prayer of the Vedas. In both cases, just two words: *gnōthi sauton*; *ko'ham?*—and to complete the symbolism we need two more words: those of the response.

"Know thyself!" γνῶθι σαυτόν (*gnōthi sauton*), provided that *knowing* is more than an epistemic act and represents the existential identification with what is known; provided also that the *self* in question is more than a solitary rational biped and represents a *Self* that embraces all reality, as recognized by the great masters. "He who knows himself knows his Lord" is a *ḥadīth* of the Prophet that echoes Plato. "He who knows himself knows all things," adds Meister Eckhart, himself echoed by the Hebrew mystics of the time. "Know him who makes you know yourself," replied an Ishmaelite master to a disciple who asked him how to know God. It would be superfluous to add that this self-knowledge is not the cognition of an object "myself," but of "quaedam spiritualis vel divinae suavitatis experientia," as William of St.-Thierry described the mystical experience—"a certain spiritual experience of divine suavity." The individualist interpretation of this phrase has distorted its meaning, as is clear from antiquity in the myth of Narcissus.

"Who am I?" (*ko'ham*), provided that the *who* comes from the same origin as the *I*, not from mere curiosity, and represents the aspiration to know what must be known; provided that the *I* is not confused with my ego and represents the self-consciousness of all that can be known; provided also that the *who* is really a *who* and not a *what*.

These two phrases can perhaps summarize and express the essence of the mystical experience: self-knowledge made up of a *gnōsis* full of *eros* (sentiment) and of an *autos* that embraces the macrocosm. Whereas Greece inserts a verb, an action, India

does not even dare use the verb to be (who [am] I?), for fear that the question arise from the mind and not from the deepest part of the I (self).

The last line of Plato's last letter explains in just two words: αὐτοῦ ἴσθι (*autos isthi* [be yourself])—although some translators have attributed various nuances to the phrase. The counsel is as simple as it is difficult. The three phrases we have mentioned could also be completed with another, equally simple to express and difficult to put into practice: *vivere Vitam*—in just two words, “live Life”—which, translated according to Christian tradition, equates to the experience of God, since “in Him was life.” Again, *ars vivendi* might be a classical expression of what we are trying to say.

This, then, is the mystical experience: the experience of Life, a sensory, intellectual and spiritual experience, as we have said. It is an experience open to “every person who comes into this world.” It is the human experience in its fullness, which is a fullness that does not admit quantitative comparisons: a thimbleful of water is just as full as a large jug.

By putting the question in these terms, it is easily to see the classical interior path that mysticism prefigures. In order to know “who I am,” I clearly have to love others, so as to know what they can make me discover I am—but in the final analysis it is I who must answer the question who I am, without confusing the I with the ego. Others may tell me how they see or judge me, but the question of “Who am I?” cannot be addressed by the response, “who is my I”; nor by, “who is the I”; nor indeed by just listening to “who you are,” since it is not I who must understand it. The mystical experience is eminently personal, although not individualistic. Mysticism overcomes alienation without falling into solipsism. With a minimum of introspection (to avoid using the terms “meditation” or “contemplation”) I can see that this I cannot be identified with my body or my soul, or with what I am at this moment here and now, or with an I stripped of all its constitutive bonds. Nor is the question who am I answerable with a *me*—myself, for example. In one of the *Upaniṣads*, a master puts the question “Who are you?” to his disciple who wants to be freed after asking “who he is.” The disciple replies, “I am you,” and the master frees him. Likewise, as we have said, the *vedānta* specifies that only the *brahman* can say *aham-brahman* (I [am] *brahman*). The mystical experience, then, aspires to “that knowledge [existence] knowing which one knows all”—to quote another *Upaniṣad*. This “all” is not “all particular things”; it is neither analytical nor synthetic knowledge; it is not a purely intellectual knowledge, nor is it only the knowledge of the “reasons of the heart” (Pascal). It is the communion with reality that involves all our senses, our intellect, soul, and strength, to paraphrase the fundamental precept of the Torah. One cannot love God without loving one's neighbor, nor one's neighbor without loving God. But one cannot love either God or one's neighbor without knowing them, and one cannot know them without seeking communion with them, through loving them. We have already said that the great heresy (in the most literal sense) of our time is the separation of knowledge from love. Cosmotheandric mysticism comprehends

the world in this communion, since God, Man and World form an a-dual relationship that is therefore neither tritheist nor trisubstantialist. This is the *novum* of our millennium—even though it has its roots in the beginnings of history.

We must qualify this *novum* by completing the previous thought on interiority with the mystical discovery of exteriority, without separating it from the former. This is made clear in the Gospel of St. Thomas, echoing also a passage from the letter to the Ephesians: "When the inner is like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower," then the kingdom will come. Knowledge of all things in ourselves, and of ourselves in all things, implies the a-dual union between microcosm and macrocosm. This is the experience of the reality of the Mystical Body. The sensitivity we are talking about is as much open to the external world as to the internal, as much to cultivating politics as spirituality, and as much concerned with others as with oneself.

Precisely because all problems are in relation to one another and cannot be resolved singly, the mystical experience, as an experience of the *totum*, albeit *in part*, is related to all human problems—not because it holds the solution, but because it is part of a full understanding of the problem, and of the answer when there is one. Mysticism grasps the question and labors with the intellect (how to relate "theory" with practice?), but does not agonize over the answer because it knows the answer cannot be the conclusion of any syllogism, but rather a "new creation" in each case, a radical novelty. Mysticism lives in a framework of freedom. "*Nibbāna* is the counterpart [*patibhāga*] of freedom," says a Buddhist text of the *Majjhima-nikāya*.

Mystical vision includes both the Other (*alter*) and My Self, Humanity, the Earth, and the Divine. It is the cosmotheandric experience. All else is reductionism.

We labor this point because too often mysticism is described as indifferent to human suffering, remote from the lives of the majority of our fellow human beings, and high up in the heavens. What about the fate of our contemporaries who live in the agony of need and of exploitation by their peers? What about our world that has created misery where there was only poverty? Is the mystic indifferent to the present panorama of institutionalized violence and legitimized injustice? Where is the sense in telling people humans are the children of God when they are forced to live inhuman lives? Shall we take refuge in the "high places of the spirit" with their thick walls and guarded cloisters, where the cries of our fellow human beings cannot be heard?

The mystic does not launch into activism or despair, but neither does he block his ears or sit inert; he knows that water can open a path where there was no stream, that there are underground rivers that water and nourish the earth. We are speaking of humility—of the *humus*—that lets the *water* penetrate inside and reach its core. We have already mentioned that the mystical experience is both cognitive and loving and therefore both active and passive—as much an interior, centripetal path as a centrifugal dynamism toward the exterior. In our final *sūtra* we shall speak about this rather neglected aspect of a certain mysticism.

The mysticism of our times, as a full vision of reality, is deeply sensitive to suffering in the world, especially that inflicted by humans and human injustice. This does not make the mystic a "political activist" in the usual sense. The mystic combines the three dimensions of reality without sacrificing either his peace or his equanimity, but he is ready to get his hands dirty if necessary. He knows the human condition entails pain, *duḥkha*, suffering, but at the same time does not allow himself to be overwhelmed by it because he sees the invisible dimension of reality and knows there is a "kingdom," an inner dwelling in which joy is invincible. Hunger and thirst for justice are characteristic of the mystical spirit. Moreover, notwithstanding psychologically and sociologically justifiable exceptions, I believe this human sensitivity to be a criterion for mystical authenticity. For too long the world has been treated to weak spiritualities that choke the consciousness (or oppress the spirit, as St. Teresa of Avila would say) and are insensitive to the human condition. The "option for the poor" in Christian liberation theology has a mystical inspiration.

Let us recap: Many historical examples traditionally classified as mystical would appear to contradict the present *sūtra*. *Apatheia*, *ataraxia*, *asakta*, detachment, indifference toward adversities—not only one's own but also those of others—freedom from the chains of this world and from the burden of the body are all, apparently, mystical "virtues."

Here we need to make three relevant observations.

The *first* consists in quoting, once again, St. Jerome: "*Corruptio optimi pessima*" (The corruption of the best is the worst corruption); this can be applied both to religion and to mysticism. "Everyone, no matter how firmly he thinks he is standing, must be careful he does not fall," said St. Paul; the highest-ranking angels were the ones who fell down into hell; whoever "believes" they are right, fulfilled, enlightened, or risen should beware they do not fall. We must be very careful not to smother the *I* in trying to dominate the ego. Egoism corrodes the ego. We can dispense with further comment here, since this is not a treatise on spirituality, but the point needs to be made.

The *second* observation regards the interpretation of mystical experience in the cultural context of the age. A case in point is acosmic "mysticism." If this world is seen as *māyā*—appearance—as a "bad night in a bad joint," as something unauthentic and transitory, as an intermediate stage of purification and so forth, then it is understandable that mysticism does not address this "vale of tears" particularly well.

Mysticism would then be a safe haven, the "ark of salvation" in this stormy sea. At least the mystics would be "saved." We have already mentioned "sacred secularity" as a (relative) *novum* of our time that is able to reappraise this world without falling into "secularism."

The *third* observation is rather more positive. The mystic is not insensitive to human pain, but he is realistic and does not admit tragedy—especially that of death.

Mysticism does not have all the answers, but it does teach us an approach that avoids falling into despair, and allows a sincere smile, albeit in a world of suffering (*duḥkha*).

Who despairs? What does he hope?  
 complete death.  
 And what death will cure the ill?  
 That which is half [death].

Thus wrote Cervantes, who is not generally mentioned in books on mysticism.

"In death is immortality" (*antaram mṛtyor amṛtam*), say the *Vedas*, highlighting the fact that death is the temporal end of the individual and immortality the *tempiternal* experience of a life that does not die—as long as we do not presume private ownership over it. "If Buddha is inside life and death, there is no life or death," wrote Dōgen, quoting other Zen masters and adding that "life and death are *nirvāṇa*." In other words, the desire to abstain from the act, given that we all die, is an unjustifiable escape, since we cannot avoid death, but we can certainly avoid injustice and suffering. To give a glass of water to the thirsty merits heaven; not to do so merits hell—even though there are different kinds of water, both life-giving and poisonous. Mysticism does not exclude discernment.

Mysticism introduces an often-forgotten dimension to the approach to this problem, and makes an effective contribution to its solution. Mystical vision, for example, shows us that the dilemma between freedom and grace that so tortured the Christian Scholastics in past centuries is a false dilemma because, from the experiential "point of view" (which goes beyond causal thought), the dilemma does not subsist. Or, to come back to our contemporary world, if the full meaning of life for Man depended solely on historico-social success, more than half of the world's population today would lose all hope and joy. In 1961, speaking on tolerance as a mystical virtue, I had occasion to say that in the crisis of the modern world, which since then has deepened, only the mystics would survive. The majority of humanity loses hope because they can no longer keep it for a future that is worsening, and they do not discover it in the invisible they cannot see—and without hope you cannot live. Here I am not referring necessarily to hope in a future life (as compensation for the pains of this one), but rather to the experience of a dimension of human life that does not eliminate suffering, but does not give way to the despair of a life of failure lived in vain. We referred earlier to *tempiternity*, which is the experience of eternity in each temporal moment of our existence. This is not the place to explore that particular idea, but I just want to emphasize the fact that mystical experience is directly related to the totality of the human condition; not only does it free us from all fear, but it also frees our actions from all inhibition for fear of failure. We do things because we find a meaning in them, not because of their results (which are always problematical). It is a cancer of the mind constantly to question ourselves.

*Die Ros ist ohn warum, sie blühet, weil sie blühet*

The rose has no why, it blooms because it blooms



... in the words of Angelus Silesius, echoing Jacopone da Todi.

But again, how often have we failed to hear around us the words of the "prudent" and of those well-placed in this world who advise us not to complicate our lives, since we cannot change anything? How often have we been held back by our fear of risk, afraid to jeopardize our prestige, our success, and perhaps even our lives? The example of *mahātma* Gandhi, ready to die after three weeks on a hunger strike in Calcutta (now Kolkata) unless the Hindūs and Muslims ceased their carnage, cannot be explained except by this mystical impulse that is not afraid to lose an ego that no longer exists—while avoiding the danger of fanaticism, which is the outright exasperation of the ego.

The example of numerous mystics shows us that action and contemplation are not mutually exclusive. Not only do they complete each other, but they also mutually entail each other, since there is no true action without contemplation, and no true contemplation without action—though of course no one is immune to error. Although by no means all so-called voluntary activity is mystically inspired, its popularity in our times is an example of the fact that the pragmatism of efficiency is not the only incentive of human activity.

Whatever the truth may be, it seems to me absolutely necessary to stress the idea of mysticism within ordinary life, within secularity. Modern examples of this are starting to become known and appreciated. The mystic is incarnated and deeply rooted in this world because he does not split Life into two parts; he does not separate his own earthly existence from what has been called the "other world," although perfectly well aware of the distinction. Cervantes said that death is a halfway point but not a means, eschewing the interpretation of the period.

It is easy to see why mysticism has been misunderstood and perceived as a negation of earthliness or detached from ordinary life. Mystical texts do tend to emphasize *asakta*, detachment, indifference, and tranquillity. When seen from outside, interpreted without the mystical spirit and out of their context, they often appear to have an irritating superiority complex, rather like the "opium of the people." But seen from within, with the right hermeneutical key, they are a hymn to freedom, freeing us from our slavish dependence on factors that are unrelated to our lives. This is not to deny that a certain form of mysticism has negated human life by accepting the dichotomy between this life and the Divine life: that form is dualist "mysticism."

The true mystic is not conditioned by any circumstance; he is not a slave to the outside world and does not make tragedy out of calamity; he does not ontologize any law, and therefore lives and acts in complete freedom. He knows that the Sabbath was made for Man and not vice versa. Let me try to explain: The huge influence of the Roman tradition on the Western world is due to the fact that it was able to penetrate every crack of the Abrahamic culture, thanks to a positive symbiosis with burgeoning Judeo-Christianity in the early Christian centuries. I have defined this as the "ontologization of law." The encounter between Roman law and the Jewish Torah transforms *lex* into *iustitia*, the juridical order into the cosmic order,

legitimacy into right and, ultimately, *duty* into an authentic *being*. Thus Being is transformed into what Must-Be. The moral order is ontologized; its transgression merits the death penalty, since it destroys Being, which is a "mortal sin." The *lex eterna* is the expression of reality. In this cultural context it is blasphemy to say that "there is no law for the just"—but then one has to be just in order not to be. The mystic is involved with all human problems but without ontologizing them, and thus he demonstrates sovereign independence of all human events and all juridical orders. He is not bound to anything; he is free. The Master of Nazareth was rightly condemned by the Law—which he had the courage to transgress.

This approach is a dangerous one and can degenerate into insensitivity, cruelty, and even libertinage, which is why a degree of caution is justified in all spiritual life. The mystic suffers on account of injustice and tries to right it but does not despair, since he does not ontologize it; his involvement in human affairs is serious but serene, almost playful—even though the game is one of "life and death." The mystic discovers the relativity (relatedness) of everything; he is a realist, not a relativist. The mystic is at peace; he does not hope in *another* life, but in this one—that is, he lives Life, even if he suffers at not being able to live it in constant fullness (as his temporality predominates). The Buddha smiles; the Taoist does not accept the rules of the social game; the *sannyāsīn* does not offer sacrifice, nor does he obey society's rules; the saint is free. One cannot deny the audacious and indeed dangerous nature of the mystical path. To underline the point once again, mysticism without pureness of heart can degenerate into anarchy and thereby cease to be mysticism. Pureness of heart, however, is not a "commandment" but a condition. "The pure in heart shall see God."

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It is undeniable that when it came to justifying the existential attitude of the mystic, without the mystical spirit itself and by means of rational philosophy, the dichotomy between heaven and earth, reality and appearance, this life and the other life appeared to be the most plausible, and the most rational, hypothesis. Nor can it be denied that many mystics, as children of their times, believed this—and interpreted their experiences accordingly. In order to attain a state of freedom they separated themselves from the world: "*Terrena despicere*" (Despise earthly things), says the Christian liturgy. Even more disturbing are certain *theravāda* texts and some Hindū practices that urge us to meditate on the decomposition of the human body—albeit with the goal of freeing us from all attachment.

This is where the *crisis of the modern world* has its roots; it cannot live with mysticism as it is often presented, but equally it cannot live without "authentic" mysticism. But here, as in every other field, we cannot prematurely and puritanically separate the wheat from the darnel. What these *sūtras* aim to do is help to discern, not to separate—and far less to condemn. As we have been taught, "Judge not."

For a number of complex reasons, and perhaps in order to cure one form of extremism with another, overlooking the "middle way," religiosity has been presented to us as negating Life, and mysticism as an "escape route," and so we have swung to the opposite extreme where the remedy is worse than the ill. It is the task of our age to restore the equilibrium.

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The *great crisis of philosophy* in today's world is due to the loss of that mystical sense of existence that "official philosophy" has not cared to nurture. A philosophy as a simple *opus rationis* neither guides nor illuminates Man in his daily life. The sad thing is that the official philosophy has already capitulated, thus leaving the field open to all manner of fundamentalisms and sects. Man needs a star, but, like that of the Three Kings, it is not static: it moves, even hides, and requires us to ask for advice and help, even perhaps from our enemy, although we may return home by another route. The star is not a tourist guide—just as cathedrals were not built to be visited by tourists. We need to search the skies and let the light of the star shine inside us, and then start moving on our journey—even though we may not see the star because of the clouds that darken our horizon. Man is guided by the star but moves autonomously because of what is inside him—life. Man is not moved solely by objective rationality, but also by instinct, passion, love, hatred, pleasure, ideals, or perhaps by a will that does not always follow the intellect. And so the world goes, one may say, without following reason. And why does it not follow reason? A purely rational response may satisfy reason, but does not move the human being. "And so the world goes," as they say. "If you don't like how the world goes," God is supposed to have replied to a democratic representative who visited him in heaven, "make it go differently." Reason has a natural veto function, so that irrational things give you a sense of discomfort, annoyance, guilt, and in the long run, unhappiness.

Contradiction (the sin against reason) at this level is not only false but unnatural. But the driver of human actions is not reason; it is those "forces" we have just mentioned. It is quite clearly love (positive or negative) that "moves the sun and other stars." The mystical experience, as we have described it, is what harmonizes all human energy and channels it toward Good, Truth, and Beauty in their many manifestations—and it is not a luxury in human history.

When Plato proposed that philosophers should govern the "public weal," he did not mean that the people we call "intellectuals" should take the reins of power in the "republic." This all-too-common interpretation does nothing but describe ourselves and highlight the crisis of philosophy we are talking about. What Plato meant is that true philosophers—those who had not separated knowledge from love, and vice versa—were the prudent, the merciful, and the wise, capable of resisting the temptation of power through their love, and of overcoming the weakness of egoism through their knowledge. In short, he prefigured the mystic as the complete Man.

In other words, philosophy, when not mutilated, is mystical; that is, it includes the three dimensions of reality as much in the object (the content) as in the subject (the philosopher). This does not mean, however, that it can offer all the answers—not just because Man is not omniscient, but also because within reality there is error and especially evil. Knowing the diagnosis is not the same thing as knowing the treatment, let alone how to administer it. There is something in reality that escapes all intellection. A mystic is not scandalized by his own ignorance. Blessed is he who has achieved ignorance (*agnosia*), as Evagrius Ponticus said. But he is of course aware of it, and so cannot be a fanatic. To quote Nicholas of Cusa, his *ignorance is learned*.

The question we are talking about is of paramount importance—the unconfessed scandal of a rational philosophy. According to pure logic, an omniscient Being knows all that is *scibile*—all that can be known. However, short of declaring ourselves loyal followers of Parmenides and identifying Being with Thought, we have no reason to suppose that all reality is knowable, even by a supreme Mind. Mystical experience is not scandalized by the existence of Mystery—not even the *mysterium iniquitatis*. Paradoxically speaking, evil is the great antidote to reason, as it reveals the existence of something which, if we could understand it, would cease to exist as evil; it reveals, in fact, that reality is something more than intelligibility, and thus makes us *realists* in every sense of the word. The mystical experience, having touched the Mystery, recognizes both its positive and its negative aspects. Job was a just man, but he was not a mystic until he experienced, with his family and in his own flesh, the human condition.

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Similarly, the *great crisis of religion* in today's world is due to the loss of a mystical sense of its essence. Religion without mysticism is reduced to a more or less convincing ideology, or worse, a more or less useful institution, in abandonment of its goal, which is to inspire a personal journey of liberation. Mysticism discovers the third dimension of reality within human activities themselves. Too often, many religions have undervalued the reality of the world (including the body), worrying instead about the "soul," "heaven," *nirvāṇa*, *mokṣa*, or otherworldly happiness—despite the example and the protests of many mystics who have discovered *sacred secularity* ("God moves among pots and pans" [St. Teresa], "*nirvāṇa* is *saṃsāra*," "on earth as it is in heaven"). The great challenge of contemporary mystical experience is to integrate all these values in the ultimate sphere of reality, recognizing the *ontonomy*, and therefore the dignity, of every being. Here I am referring to mysticism interpreted according to the cosmotheandric vision, which, despite the work of many mystics, has remained in the shadows of modern culture. To say that mysticism must also enter into politics means that politics must be founded on a complete experience of its own field, which is the human community in communion with Earth and heaven. It does not mean any kind of theocracy or "Caesar-popery," as should be abundantly clear after all we have said. The healthy separation of church and state has something

to do with the impossible separation of religion and life. I say impossible because human life, since it is conscious of its own contingency, is of itself religious: it needs a "support" to avoid falling in on itself—that is what contingency is.

Religion is what ties us (*religat*) to reality in all its many aspects; there is a dimension of Man that could be defined "religiosity," as distinct from his sociological aspect (religionism) and his intellectual content (religiology). We should not confuse religion with any particular organization, whose legitimacy we do not question but whose limitations, equally, we must not ignore. Religion is more than sociology: religion unites my spirit with my soul and my soul with my body. It also unites me with those similar to me and with the whole world, and it unites me with the spirit, the Mystery, whether we call it divine or by any other homeomorphic equivalent. This description, however, would not be correct if religion were therefore interpreted as a "bond" that limits our freedom. Religion is the consciousness of having a bond—that is, the relatedness of the Mystical Body of reality—whether we call it Buddha, Christ, *karman*, or simply solidarity (not that these are equivalent notions). If I am conscious of my religion ("re-binding") then it does not "bind" or constrain me; on the contrary, it unbinds and liberates me. This is why every authentic religion has an intellectual factor that it cannot do without. This is the "radical relativity" that I have called *perichōrēsis* and that Buddhism calls *pratītya-samutpāda*.

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The same can be said of the ethical problems of humanity. To judge the morality of an action by its good or bad results is as unconvincing as accepting the rules and regulations of a legislator as metaphysical principles, justifying a war based on its "good results" or defending morality in bioethical issues because there may be some usefulness in treating certain illnesses. Mysticism is certainly capable of "demystifying." Ethical principles are not the result of deduction based on a code (if anything, that comes into the legal field), and cannot be derived by induction from cases that have produced good results (like not telling lies, for example). Ethics does not come from deduction or induction, but from co-naturality, from the very ethos of Man, and that is what the mystical experience reveals. A sign of the *ethical crisis* of our time is the attempt to attribute sociological foundations to ethics without having the courage to look at its anthropological basis, whose weakness is the cause of the crisis.

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There are few cases where the political role of mysticism can be seen more clearly than in social and economic issues. Justice does not always "pay," and right behavior toward one's neighbor or the earth is not the most productive for those who hold power. Only mystical vision allows us to act without a justification extrinsic to the action itself, as the *Bhagavad-gītā*, among many other texts, teaches us. This is the secret of love. Love finds its full meaning in every action. Thus, for example, in

ecological issues, a certain nationalism (*amor curvus*) can degenerate and lead to the predominance of national interests over the common good of the Earth and of humanity. No intelligence can foresee the results of an action. The repercussions of *karman* are mysterious, as Yajñavalkya says in an *Upaniṣad*. There is *karman*, but not the law of *karman*, it is often said, because although *dharma* may in some ways make law, *karman* represents a kind of universal solidarity that is strengthened or weakened by the free actions of Man.

The political function of mysticism consists in undoing utilitarianism at all levels, as in a famous sonnet (attributed to St. Teresa of Avila or St. Francis Xavier):

I am not moved, my God, to love you  
by the heaven you have promised:  
nor by the hell so feared  
to therefore stop offending you.

[...]

You have no need to give, that I should love you  
for even if I hoped not what I hope,  
I would love you still as I love you.

Here we can overlook the debates over "pure love" whose transition from the *devotio moderna* starts to look suspiciously like the beginning of later pragmatism. Mysticism is always disinterested. Actions are performed for themselves, as the *Bhagavad-gītā* already recognized, and as was reinforced by the Sufism that inspired the Spanish and French mysticism of later centuries. Rābi'a al-'Adawiya, a Sufi mystic of the eighth century BC, said,

Oh, my God! If I adore you for fear of Hell,  
then burn me.  
If I adore you for hope of Paradise,  
exclude me from it.  
But, if I adore you only for yourself, do not separate me  
from your eternal beauty.

The mystical intuition is not teleological, that is, it does not seek an end; it is more serene. There is no journey, because each step is the destination—given that we are on foot, and not in a fast car. As a Persian poet wrote,

They never tire  
those who follow this path  
because it is both  
journey and end.

A purely instrumental culture cannot be mystical. The great Judeo-Christian crisis, as well as that of Islam, results from having projected eschatology onto a linear, historical timeline. The God of history does not come out of it too well, either in the past or indeed today, and Abrahamic humanity is starting to lose patience after almost four thousand years of waiting. The God of peace has not kept his historical promise—and the eschatology of linear temporality has lost a good deal of its credibility.

Notwithstanding certain notable texts, the chapter on mysticism and politics is still to be written—and this is not surprising, given the infiltration into public life of a “religiology” that is narrow, not to say sectarian (in the etymological sense). But one extreme does not justify another. In reality, mysticism disrupts the claims of every theocracy, since it is not an ideology and does not make an idol out of what many call “God.”

The mystic does not “await” the end of the world (in the historical sense) in order to “enter” into the kingdom; he knows that “particular judgment” and “universal judgment” (to use the terms of the Christian catechism) coincide with each other. The mystic does not deny time but lives in *tempiternity*. The acts of a mystic distinguish between the end (that is not for later) and the finality (that does not aim at something else), and relies on neither. His action is *sunder Warumbe* (without a reason). To put it another way, without mysticism, those who want to build a “happy future” sacrifice the present; in order to conquer the “glory” of a future empire, we eliminate the enemies of today; to create a “just society,” we enslave the intervening generations. . . . Or, to put it even more simply, without the mystical vision the ends justify the means—because the means are seen (and justified) exactly as a function of their ends. Without a mystical vision, we have no way to escape from the fierce pragmatism of the cleverest, the bravest, or the strongest. Mysticism does not exploit (for a given end) because it lives the *tempiternal* sense of every action and radically eliminates all fear and cowardice. It is understandable that institutions based on power (as distinct from authority) try to eliminate the mystical vision of life—in both the political and the religious sphere, in business and everywhere else.

Mysticism, once again, is not insensitive to injustice or to suffering. It frees us from the fear of both, and so allows us to act with serenity and equanimity—but without taking away our enthusiasm or indignation, or indeed our prudence. Liberation theology is a timely and urgent reminder that the voice and the cry of the oppressed (*dalit*) are “divine” revelations, and it is mysticism that reveals them.

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So-called ecology, or the science of the Earth’s (limited) resources, will not bear fruit, as is becoming evident, as long as it remains just a pragmatic science, aiming at better exploitation of natural resources. The very language being used shows that we have not changed our mentality: we see the Earth as a mere *object* whose

resources can be exploited, while trying to make them last as long as possible. The word *ecosophy* is meant to indicate the mystical experience of matter in general and of the Earth in particular. Ecosophy is the wisdom that makes us feel that the Earth is also a *subject*, and moreover, a constitutive and definitive dimension of reality. It is not to be used, therefore, as a means, but treated as a companion. Ecosophy goes far beyond the vision of the Earth as a living being; it shows us how matter is just as essential an element of reality as conscience or what we commonly call "the divine." In a certain sense the mystic lives the experience of the incarnation; he discovers that flesh, too, can be divine.

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We have spoken mainly of mystical experience and not mystical vision, in order not to fall into the aforementioned heresy of the separation of knowledge from love. Experience, as we have seen, does not just have a cognitive element. One cannot have an *exclusively* "theoretical" experience. Rational certainty is insufficient. It seems to me that a tripartite anthropology is indispensable for a correct interpretation of mysticism. To interpret these *sūtras* only with the mind would be to misunderstand them. But writing, too, has its limitations. "Scripture is only Scripture, and nothing more," says Angelus Silesius, and he also adds that what we really need is directly to hear the Word. These *sūtras* are not a series of rants, but rather invitations to meditate so that Life may be born.

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*In summary:* Mystical experience is the integral experience of reality. If reality is identified with God, then it will be the experience of God; if reality is seen as Trinitarian, then it will be the cosmotheandric experience; if we see it as empty, then it will be the experience of emptiness. . . . In any case it remains the experience of "Everything." Thus, we can overcome the stereotype of a mysticism that is lost in the heavens, disincarnate and distant from the joys and pain of the world, but without thereby limiting it to pure earthliness or smothering it in activism, given that mysticism sees the reality of the human condition in its totality—and therefore does not lack peace or tranquillity, but eliminates the fear of taking part in the human endeavor for Justice.

In brief, mysticism, as we have said, is not a specialized subject or a privilege of the few; it belongs to human nature itself; it invites us to take part consciously—that is to say, humanly—in the adventure that is reality.



## 10

### THE MYSTICAL LANGUAGES

Some, although they see, cannot see it,  
And others, although they hear, cannot hear it.  
But to some the Word reveals itself spontaneously,  
Like a bride in her wedding gown who gives herself to her spouse.

—*Rg-veda* X.71.4

We can summarize what has been said so far by stating that mystical experience is the conscious opening up to the third dimension of reality, which, together with the other two, allows us to live life to the full.

While this consciousness does not exclude sensory consciousness or intellectual consciousness, neither is it confused with them. One could even speak of three levels of the same consciousness. For many, this third interpretation is like a "glimmer," albeit a faint one, showing that there is more in life than what is perceived by the senses or understood by the mind. This "something more" is also of a different order. It is not to be confused with what we have not yet perceived or what we do not know. It is not a horizontal extension toward what we may be able to know in the future, but something that is reached by a vertical leap toward another dimension of reality. One could say, perhaps, that it is what distinguishes us from other living beings that have sensibility and consciousness but that do not have the mystical sense. Certain people are particularly open to this dimension of reality; these people we call "mystics," although, as we have said, this consciousness is open to all.

This dimension or sphere of reality is experienced, interpreted, and expressed as a function of diversity—religious, cultural, temporal, geographical, and historical. To put it another way, there are different mystical languages—and here we must be careful not to suggest that they all describe the *same* reality, as though reality were something that can be objectivized. The various descriptions represent different homeomorphic equivalents of the mystical experience.

The literature on mysticism is vast, given that mysticism is a human phenomenon and not the legacy of one single culture. Nevertheless, every culture possesses and creates its own language.

The third part of this study is meant to be no more than an appendix to the main part. We shall limit ourselves, therefore, to commenting on this diversity of

languages, to which we alluded previously in the introduction. Needless to say, we use the term "language" in its deepest and traditional sense, and not merely as a way to transmit messages; rather, it represents one of the most complete forms of human communion. Whatever Man touches, feels, perceives, glimpses, creates, thinks, sees, doubts, and so on finds its expression in language. There are many kinds of language, and we will not go into that here. We shall only refer to the human language that aims to communicate the mystical experience as such.

The expressions we shall use to simplify the mystical languages have a purely heuristic value. Furthermore, since every religion, at least implicitly, forms a coherent whole, any symbol described could be related, in effect, to any other. All symbols are related to one another. The symbols chosen seem to be particularly meaningful and emblematic, but I do not in any way suggest that they are the most important or the most specific to any religion.

Between the experience as expressed by language and the experience itself there is an a-dual relation. When language is the verbalization of an experience, what is said is inseparable from the saying of it, even though the distance between them is virtually infinite. Thence there arises the previously mentioned academic discussion over whether mystical experience is or is not the same in the different religious traditions; we shall come back to this shortly. Every linguistic expression of an experience has its origin in the experience itself, and at the same time alters it. Every experience is unique and therefore incomparable. Every language possesses a linguistic form that is intelligible only within its own context, which itself is written into a well-established cultural framework. So-called comparative mysticism is the confrontation of mystical languages, which themselves can be compared as long as an independent criterion of comparison has been previously agreed upon. Here we shall not enter into the question of whether such a criterion exists or could exist. We limit ourselves to some more general questions.

### The Symbolic Language

All languages say "something," but how are we to know if this "something" is the same thing when the language is different? We are dealing with "mysticism," a word that itself is not exactly translatable into Asiatic languages, for example, except by paraphrasing and metaphors where the respective semantic fields generate different connotations. There are certainly homeomorphic equivalents, third-level analogies. In Sanskrit, for instance, which is actually an Indo-European language, there are half a dozen words that could be used to translate "mysticism." The closest candidates would be those coming from the root *guh*—meaning hide, secret, cave, mystery (*guhā* is a cave, and *gūdha*, mystery); *rahasya* suggests solitude, secret, mystery, and so on. In short, there is no universal language. There are mystical languages; the singular is a mere concept, not a language.

I believe, personally, that I can "speak" with some proficiency four of these languages: Hindū, Buddhist, Christian, and Secular.

So as not to distract our attention from the already quite complex central theme of this study, we shall once again limit ourselves to brief summaries of three languages and enter more deeply into the Christian language, given that my own Spanish language, like Italian, is closely linked to the Christian culture.

One may ask how I can sincerely *speak* so many languages. We can assume, clearly, that one says what one means, and one means that of which one has experienced the intelligibility, intended as an indicator of truth. No one can mean something he believes to be false. One answer, the most currently accepted, although not mine, claims that it is possible because the mystical languages say fundamentally the same things, as when we express the same thought in different languages. Intercultural experience has helped me to describe the crypto-Kantianism of this answer, as though it held the "thing itself in itself," the selfsame *noumenon* "hidden" behind every language, behind every (linguistic) expression of the same thought. This could possibly be true where thoughts are concerned—although I doubt it, since the connotations of the same thought are not the same in different languages when the words express something more than abstract concepts previously defined. This is how language begins to be reduced to a mere system of signs—a consequence of nominalism. But in our case, we are not talking about simple "thoughts" as intellectual constructs, but about the mystical experience itself, which is unique in any case. The most I could hope for is sometimes to encounter "homeomorphic equivalents," following a profound interpretation of the experience within the respective contexts.

As well as the crypto-Kantianism already mentioned, we should add the "algorithmization" of current language that is due to the influence of modern science on current thought patterns. We think in concepts that tend to be univocal, and when they are analogous we look for a *primum analogatum* in order to explain their transposition by likeness. There are indeed analogous concepts, but mystical language is not conceptual. Misunderstandings often arise when it is interpreted as a system of signs that indicate a meaning as a "thing in itself." The language of the mystics is a symbolic language, and this requires, on the one hand, the participation of the subject—not only the speaking subject who speaks about his experience but also the subject spoken to (or listening subject), as otherwise the symbol is unintelligible as such. On the other hand, mystical language is not exclusively subjective, and it pretends an element of truth on the part of the subject. Every word says something; that is to say, it acquires a meaning for the user and is part of the semantic field of which the word is an expression. All the same, while the semantic field of conceptual language is generally postulated and accepted (more or less consciously), the semantic field of symbolic language is created in the dialogic dialogue. As we have said, a symbol is a symbol only when it symbolizes, that is when we participate in what the symbol "means," and that depends in large measure on the symbolizer. How many "religious" sermons fail to make real contact with the listener because the preacher does not make full use of the power of the symbol—or because the listener has not been initiated in the field?

A word is a *term* when its meaning terminates and is determined by a system of postulates or principles objectively accepted by both parties (the speaker and the listener—or reader). Scientific language is an example of this—a particular case of language correctly accepted as “logical.” The word is a symbol when its meaning depends on a common ground where both active and passive agents of the symbol take part. The musical notation of a song is a language of (conventional) terms. A song when it is sung is a symbolic language in which the singer and the listener participate, even though our interpretations may be very different. I could interpret it as a bad song, someone else as a good one, but both of us hear it as music. Yet there is more: a deaf person does not hear the music at all. Initiation, in its widest sense, is the traditional act through which hearing is opened up. Otherwise, “one hears without hearing and understands without understanding”; we shall not enter into that argument at this point.

Mystical language, as we have said, is a symbolic language. This leads to the use of sensory metaphors: touch, sight, light, sound . . . which point to a bodily experience more than an intellectual one, although the two cannot be separated. Bodily experience is not communicable as such; it needs an intermediary. Even in the case of physical contact, where touching and being touched coincide, the respective experiences may be interpreted differently. A caress, for example, might give pleasure to the giver but not to the receiver. Mystical experience, as we have said and will repeat, is ineffable—nonwithstanding the fact that mysticism speaks about it.

With a suitable intermediary I can understand the mystical language of another, but can I express it as my own? This has been the question.

We have really just finished preparing the ground: only those who are open to the mystical experience can “understand” another mystical language. Theology requires the *oculus fidei*, or the *auditus fidei* as we might call it, echoing Christian Scripture or the *śruti* (what is heard), according to the *Veda*. Music must be able to be listened to. I can listen to music, to return to our previous example, even if I do not find it good. This does not imply that my taste may not change, so that I could enjoy jazz while still appreciating Bach.

We have already stated that every experience is not only ineffable but also unique—and what is unique is also incomparable. All mysticism, since it is an experience, is so. Now, can one subject speak two experiential languages? Certainly, one cannot speak two languages simultaneously, but we can immerse ourselves in a culture, speak its language, and live in its world without thereby forgetting our own original language to which we go back and feel at home.

At this point, we need to make an observation that takes us back to the ineluctable intellectual aspect of the problem. As an example, I could not be sincere in talking about my Hindū experience if my conscience told me I was betraying my Christian religiosity. If that were the case, we would find ourselves faced with a case of “conversion” in the sociological sense of the word: I abandon one religion in order to follow another. Mystical experience does not imply belonging to any one sociological community, but to the Mystical Body of reality “in spirit and truth.”

I would pause, therefore, to clarify whether the distinct interpretations of diverse experiences are compatible with one another, without falling into the irrationalism of contradictory assertions. It is here that the mystical dimension of religious pluralism clearly emerges, incompatible only with idolatrous orthodoxy—that is to say, with the identification of a religion with a doctrine that renders absolute its conceptual elements. Religions are not the same, and belonging to one or another is not an indifferent matter; neither can we expect mystical experiences to be the same. But we must not fall into the trap of a fundamentally irrational relativism, moved by a pious desire for concord. That would be ultimately superficial and, in the long run, counterproductive. As we have repeatedly stressed, relativism is not to be confused with relativity.

Here we have the philosophical (theological) position of those who confess to feeling at home in more than one place—and we come to the current metaphor of the *many abodes* (belonging to a certain literary tradition). God makes his home in the hearts of believers, according to Islamic mysticism (Abu al-Hasan al-Nuri, among others). “We do not have here a permanent city” (πόλις, *polis*), says Christian Scripture. The law of hospitality, which consists in ensuring that the guest is treated as if in his own home, is sacred for many religions. This would be an ecumenical position. Religions are not exclusive game reserves, run on the principle of private property.

There is still, however, work to be done. The interpretation of experiences, even when not identical, must be sufficiently flexible to overcome contradiction. It is significant that mysticism is not reducible to “dictions” but to experiences.

This is not the right place for an exhaustive reply to the question. I shall limit myself to an observation. There certainly exist contradictory doctrines; however, an experience is not a doctrine. We have already said that we cannot say anything about *e*, the bare experience, but only about *E*, our awareness of it. Only after we have seriously *studied* different traditions can we arrive at the experience of what they mean. I use “study” in its Ciceronian connotation: “Animi assidua et vehemens ad aliquam rem applicata magna cum voluntate occupatio” (The intense and passionate devotion of the spirit to any subject with great will). To put it more simply, one can penetrate in a vital and existential way what other cosmic visions have experienced when one does not consider it incompatible with one’s own fundamental intuitions.

Experiences (and faith is an experience), although inseparable from their interpretation, are not doctrines (beliefs). If someone asserts that  $2 + 2 = 5$ , the first thing I will tell them is that I do not understand, and only *then* that the assertion is false, since for me it is evident that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . That is, I *deduce* that the assertion that it is 5 is false, given that 4 is not 5. This deduction is perfect, but is based on a postulate of rational uniformity that is not applicable to mystical languages.

To summarize, interreligious communication is not possible. The concepts have a direct relationship with the cultural matrix that conceived them, but extrapolations can be made. Symbols, on the other hand, are subject to greater elasticity, although they require the subjective participation of the knower, as we have already said. I do not deal at length with symbols and symbolic language here, since I have done

that elsewhere. We shall just say that mystical language is symbolic and polysemic, but it is a human language—more human than conceptual language, because it has a lesser degree of abstraction. This is what allows us to speak of linguistic invariants, as we shall be doing, even though they are not culturally universal.

### The Linguistic Invariants

Many kinds of mystical phenomenon have been defined. There are good reference works on this complex issue. Here we shall restrict ourselves to the subject and not the phenomenon, although the two are intimately linked. As a tribute to the dominant classification mentality, and for love of clarity, we shall use the plural and mention three linguistic invariants, even though strictly speaking there is only one invariant: human beings speak and their language is human language because it indicates something that transcends it.

#### *Ineffability*

Language, in the strict sense, is human language. Animals communicate, but they do not speak. In any case we are referring to human language, and this belongs to the essence of Man: *Homo loquens*, *puruṣaya vāg rasah* (the essence/lymph/perfume of Man is the word). Through language, Man manifests what he is. However, Man is a mystery, and language does not reach the mystery of Man, but only reveals Man in a veiled, hidden way; it says that it cannot say, or says what Man is not. Ineffability is an invariant of language itself. Many languages abandon the attempt to say what Man is, and are limited to describing or being signs—of things or of what will be. Mystical language, however, aims to express reality and life, but cannot; it meets with an ineffability that it “senses” in some way, but cannot say. The mystic does not say what he would want to say, because he always insists on speaking of the ineffable. This is why his speaking always refers to experience, which is not linguistically communicable except through translation; only those who are able to translate it into their own experience will understand. Again, St. John of the Cross:

*No quieras enviarme  
de hoy más ya mensajero  
que no saben decirme lo que quiero*

Do not wish to send me  
more messengers today  
who know not how to tell me what I want [love].<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In Spanish the verb *querer* means both to want and to love.

The mystic is unable to say what he means. To understand him, one must participate in his will, want what he wants, "love" him—and this does not preclude our critical sense, although more than one mystic has been condemned to death for what he said, for his words *ut sonant*—as they sound—or, to put it better, as they resound to the ears of those who do not love them. True love is not blind, as the proverb has it, but quite the contrary. What is blinding are hatred, absolutism, and fanaticism.

Because of this inherent ineffability, the true language of mysticism is the paradox. To play a little with the words, we could say that mystical language is a language "opposed to" (*para*) common or current opinion (*doxa*) and, with another linguistic leap, that it is a language that expresses itself at the limits (*para*) of established "dogma" (*doxa*). That is why dialectic is not the appropriate method by which to "understand" mystical language. Mystical language is paradoxical and the paradox (παράδοξος, *paradoxos*) sets us free, precisely because it opens us up to accepting opinions contrary to ours without falling into contradiction, and that is quite a delicate enterprise.

Moving ahead in our attempt to decipher the mystical language through a phenomenological analysis of its discourse, we could say that the key to understanding ineffability is faith. Faith opens us up to the ineffable dimension of reality—invisible to the *oculus mentis*, but visible to the *oculus fidei* that we have already mentioned. By faith we transcend the contents of the *logos*, but without thereby denying them. By faith we overcome rationality through an awareness of truth that cannot be rationally founded, unless faith itself falls back upon reason, which would be a vicious circle. By faith we enter the territory of the *mythos*, as we have already suggested. It is understandable why a purely rational philosophy has eliminated mysticism from its field. But we should not confuse faith with beliefs. A belief is the intellectual articulation of what one believes, which is ineffable.

Mystical language is a language that aims to express the experience of faith. To play with words once again, what is needed is not a *trans*-lation, but a "bringing" of what is said "inside" the listener or reader. It follows that mystical language does not contradict rational language, but it is contrary to it, and it complements and completes it; mystical language will often imitate rational language when the latter becomes absolute. There is fundamentalism of reason just as there is of faith.

### Love

A second invariant of mystical language is its ecstatic nature, that is, the fact that it surpasses (*ex*) its linguistic support (*stasis*). To put it another way, mystical language is a language of love; it may or may not be sentimental, but is always sensitive, that is, experiential. Whether the metaphor "speaks" of union, unity, identification, or polarity, it always speaks to us of a centrifugal movement, away from our center, which is the characteristic of love in all its forms, including the intellectual form. To reemphasize: one must be capable of love in order to understand mystical language.

Even when there are mystical languages that sharpen the knowledge of the infinite nucleus that lives in our immanence, we get there by an ecstatic leap from our immanence, that is, by an act of love—though later we may discover that it was not so much an ascent that transported us to transcendence but rather a descent of transcendence toward us, and this makes us aware of our own immanence. Our inner abyss is as far away from our superficial ego as the transcendental apex. In both cases it is a centrifugal dynamism—the characteristic of love.

Just as faith is the opening up to the ineffable, so love is the opening up to the other (*alter* and not *aliud*) and knowledge is the opening up to oneself, and this is the final part we shall now address.

### *Knowledge*

A third invariant is what we may call *gnosis* or knowledge. Mystical discourse is a language that speaks and means something, even though this something is ineffable and can only be “captured” by a leap of “love.” In any case, we are perfectly well aware that we are not dealing with a chimera, and in one way or another we do “glimpse” reality and what we say does belong to Life. Mystical language is not content to be an imaginary flower; it lays a claim to truth and (conscious) knowledge, even though it may have moments that transcend consciousness.

This consciousness cannot be demonstrated, but can manifest itself to those who, when we say “speak,” are reminded of something.

People might perhaps say that mysticism is therefore a kind of private reserve. We should reply that its territory is the human reserve, which is the characteristic of Man and his essential anthropological trait; this does not mean there will not be cultures that seek to ring-fence their mystical territory and keep it for the few “select.” Although the depth of mystical meaning certainly requires both effort and training in order to be grasped, it is not closed to anyone, and as we have said before, it seems to us to be part of the heritage of all humanity.

I do not think it necessary to dwell on the fact that this knowledge is not reducible to a “clear and distinct” rational knowledge. There also exists knowledge by co-naturality and many other contacts with reality that we can know.

### **The Hindū Language**

Hindūism does not actually exist as such; it is more like a collection of religions or spiritual paths—ways to salvation. There is no Hindū essence; rather, it is an existence, as I have explained elsewhere. Consequently, there is no *single* Hindū language. The language of Hindū mysticism is not in competition with other languages. It does not claim to be unique, although many of those who speak it believe it is the best, because it is the one that best suits them. The Hindū language welcomes all others, provided that they are not closed in on themselves, though naturally each school defends its own thought. Not all paths are for all travellers. I shall speak,



therefore, about the language of one particular "trunk" within Hindūism, leaving aside the numerous branches that manifest the vitality of the trunk. I shall restrict the description to basic experiences. I also have to underline the fact that I am not explaining doctrines, but describing an experience that I shall divide into three points that could symbolize the vision of Life as it is seen in that large number of languages, out of the whole human panoply, that are usually referred to as Hindū.

### *Saṃsāra*

The first experience is that this world flows (the root *śṛ* of the word *saṃsāra* means to flow). I cannot, therefore, touch this continuous flow. I cannot have faith in anything transient nor have trust in appearances. I also feel that the flow flows back—that is, it keeps returning (*sam*). This word also belongs to Buddhism and Jainism, but the experience is virtually universal. On the one side, everything is in flux, everything is transient; on the other, there is a certain order in this passage. There is a *harmony* in the visions of the world (described in the Scriptures), as recited in one of the first *Brahma-sūtras*: "*tat tu samanvayāt*" (this debt to harmony [concord]). There is death, but there is also a return to life. It is the individual who dies, not the life—as the *Vedas* say, "*Na jīvo mriyate*" (Life does not die). But this life is not mine: I only participate in it. That is why what "comes back" to life is all that I *have*, not all that I *am*. My real being is my ego. If I overcome my individualism, then death will hold no fear for me, because everything flows and flows back. In any case, there is "something" in me that realizes this—precisely because it is not in the "*saṃsāric*" river—something that is able to make the leap to an apparently stable visible form. What appears constant to me is only the flowing of the water that is never the same. The "something" that remains (that does not die) is the *ātman*. I take part in this immortality when I discover that this *ātman* is *brahman*. The dialectic here is not of death and resurrection but of appearance and reality. That is why Śaṅkara says, "*Satyam, neśvarād anyah saṃsāri*" (In truth, there is no transmigrator other than Īśvara, the Lord [God]). The individual is transient; the *ātman* that we can all discover inside of us, when we have overcome our ego, is immortal. What transmigrates is this divine principle that moves from one mortal body to another and animates every individual being without being confused with it. For this reason, from the perspective of the ego, it dies and transmigrates. Thus I discover the paradox that when I am dead to my ego the flow of life goes on.

Who or what, then, is this something that does not die? *Ko'ham?* Who (am) I? That is the question. And I ask, "Who am I?" because it is from the awareness that is in me, but that is not mine, that the question arises. But I am not my body that changes or my mind that wanders; I am not my soul that ages and dies. In this search for My Self I cannot stop until I encounter the *ātman*, the thing in me that neither withers nor dies. The path is an ascetic one because as long as it is my ego that is seeking my *ātman*, it will not find it. The *ātman* is not mine—it just *is*. In any case, I go on asking myself, What is this *is*? It is not my private property, since

other things and other people *are*, too. Man goes as a pilgrim toward his *ātman*, says Śaṅkara again. But for this pilgrimage I have to empty myself of all that *is* not. All that changes is illusion: in the final analysis it is not real—it is not *satasya satya*, the being of truth, the truth of truth, the being of being. My existence is a fluctuation between Being and Non-Being, *sad-asad-anir-vacaniya*, as the tradition says: an ineffable (*anir-vacaniya*) polarity between Being (*sat*) and Non-Being (*a-sat*). I cannot feel pride. Humility is the metaphysical conscience of my existence. The moral order is the cosmic order and not the legislation of one will.

But none of this satisfies my aspiration to Being. I cannot waste my life trying to save what is transient and therefore is not. This thing that is in me, but which is not yet, seeks its liberation. This brings us to the next step.

### *Mokṣa*

I can never encounter Being in Non-Being. I have to sever all the ties, weak or strong, that bind me to *saṃsāra*, to this world. Freedom is achieved only by liberating myself from this cosmic cycle. The word itself says so: *mokṣa* (*muc-*), to free oneself, to abandon oneself, to let go, to loose. I am perfectly well aware that even when I can manage not to be attracted by the world, it remains a burden and an obstacle. That is why I have to free myself of time and temporality. I have to detach myself from everything—but not with the regret of someone leaving behind something of value. We know too much psychology not to realize that no renunciation is totally without a backlash that will cause us resentment and make us look for compensation elsewhere. I must overcome all of this by discovering that what I am abandoning has no value for me. Only then shall I avoid resentment and sadness. This is true renunciation, the renunciation of appearance. In fact, I am not renouncing anything; I am liberating myself.

Then and only then shall I be able to fly toward the sun of liberation. I simply have to lose the ballast that prevents me from lifting myself toward the sun of the Divinity. And so we speak of the *jīvanmukta* or liberated soul (*mukti*) that lives in this individual life (from the root *jīv*, to live). The numerous interpretations of this experience according to the different schools allows me to interpret the experience itself without reducing the body to something unreal—an experience confirmed by Kṛṣṇa, who is both appearance and reality. What is apparent is not the unreal; it is simply the appearance of reality—without which there would be no appearance. Appearance is real as appearance—insofar as I discover it as such. Appearance is illusion and deception when I confuse it with the real, when I forget that it is *māyā*, appearance. This is *avidyā*, ignorance. *Nitya-anitya-vastu-viveka*, as the tradition says: “discernment between permanent [eternal] things and impermanent [temporal] things.” That is wisdom.

I have seen many paths, or rather many methods; they all have similar claims and are expressed according to how they “prefigure” this divine sun and this human earth: through knowledge, love, or action, and aspiring to union, company, fusion, or however the goal may be seen. The paths are indicated, as are the means. The

doctrines are innumerable. But one path or another has to be taken.

On this particular path we reach the experience of *bhakti*, of *jñāna* and of *karman*, and at the same time we realize the necessity of grace (*prasāda*) for resisting temptation, as much in monism as in dualism. I cannot believe that my being is annihilated completely, nor that it exists independently of the Divinity. What others call "resurrection," *satori*, or enlightenment . . . corresponds to the realization of *jīvanmukta*. I am attracted by Rāmānuja and I admire Śaṅkara. I am close to the *advaita* of the Kashmir (Abhinavagupta) and to an a-dualist letter of the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the *Upaniṣads*. In any case, the path is hard and must be trodden. And that is the third point.

### *Karman*

*Mokṣa* is an experience, but "heaven" is on high and I cannot reach it by myself, no matter how hard I try. I feel that grace will come and give me the strength, but I also feel that I am free and I can resist grace or even refuse it altogether. The word *karman* means "action" (from the root *kr*, to act or to do). *Karman* does not refer just to outward works: there is also intellectual activity just as there is sentiment. The path toward salvation is a path that requires activity, but not necessarily outward works—although, of course, "Everything is in relation to everything else": *sarvam sarvāt-makam*.

Furthermore, this action is not just individual action; we are all interconnected by way of a kind of universal solidarity, so that everything impacts everything else, albeit by different degrees.

The experience of *karman* can arise from conscience only if it has overcome individualism. The individual is responsible for his actions precisely because he is united to all of the rest of the world. Responsibility is always toward another or others with whom one is united in solidarity, or *karmatically*. The world is a kind of *karmatic* network that relates everything to the cosmos. My *karmatic* relationship with everything does not prejudice my freedom. There exists a connection of inter-in-dependence. Human dignity consists in the fact that, unlike other beings, Man can freely and actively influence the *karman* of this world. While other beings receive the *karmatic* material, so to speak, Man can modify it, increase it, and also extinguish it with the help of God (*Īśvara*). Just as there is a *sañcita-karman* as a result of previous experiences, so there is a *prāyaścitta karman*, or expiatory action that can transform or forgive it. *Karman* is the symbol of universal solidarity. There will be no peace on earth until we expiate and forgive the *karman* of our peers.

This last principle gives the answer to an issue that has been exhaustively debated in the various schools. It is, basically the constant tension between monism and dualism. We need to make an effort, take action, get on the path; we need to aspire to know the *brahman* (*brahma-jijñāsā*), but who is the agent? Who puts himself on the path, makes the effort; who is it that knows? The *ātman* does not act; the ego is an illusion; our phenomenological knowledge is a pure superimposition (*adyāsa*),

a false attribution; it is all a cosmic game (*līlā*). If we approach the problem with a dialectical mind there is no solution other than dualism, with all its limitations, or monism, which conflicts with common sense. The Gordian Knot is cut by the a-dualist vision, which converts the two poles of the dilemma (real and unreal) into a constitutive relationship, as I have attempted to show repeatedly.

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The experience of life according to Hindūism could be reduced to what I perceive through the three lenses that make reality seem like a world inhabited by living beings and sustained by a divine principle. The center of gravity of the Hindū language is the divine.

### The Buddhist Language

Once again, a paradox: The Buddhist language is a nonlanguage, a silence. The Buddhist language refuses to speak of the ineffable. Nevertheless, Buddhists have spoken extensively over the twenty-six centuries of their history. The Buddhist language is only indicative, like a finger that serves only to point toward the moon—although, as I have said elsewhere, it is not enough just to look where the finger is pointing, because the moon itself is in motion. This is the role of experience.

The Buddhist language is centered on Man, Man in his deepest intimacy, and intimacy can only be lived in the silence that leads to peace, once we have pacified our being and discovered that it is only transient and therefore insubstantial. It is in the experience of being insubstantial that we find our liberation.

We could complete our description here, considering that the Buddhist experience is self-interpreting. This would be the summary, based on the Buddhist language, which itself has been so named only relatively recently, by outsiders.

### *Duḥkha*

*Sabbe saṃkhārā duḥkha* (All that exists is unsatisfactory). This is the "noble truth" of the dissatisfaction of existence; usually it is translated as pain or suffering, and could be literally translated as *being unwell* (from the root *duḥ*, to lose or break down, and *stha*, to be: to be unwell or disturbed, and therefore ill at ease), because we are not in our right place. This is the cause of suffering, of malaise (*duḥkha* in Sanskrit and *dukkha* in Pāli). We have lost our "permanence." But actually this is already a betrayal of the Buddhist language: there is no such place as "permanence," since "permanence" is empty and does not exist. The Buddhist language begins by giving expression to this radical experience that is not so much one of suffering as of *dissatisfaction*. Who has not felt it? We need to get rid of this malaise without recourse to extreme violence (alienation or egocentrism), and this is done by following the middle path to eliminating dissatisfaction. This path is neither the negation of the

*ucchedavāda*, or nihilism (nothing exists, including pain), nor the negation of the *sāsvatavāda*, or substantialism (pain, like everything else, is a real substance). This unease has its origin in thirst (*tanha*), appetite, ambition, and desire.

We have to eliminate all desire, but always following the middle, mediating path that takes away the violence of the extremes ("the things that have being and the things that have not"). This means neither wishing to be nor wishing not to be; neither killing our desires (moved by the very desire for well-being) nor feeding them to see if they can be sated. In this way there emerges the pure *aspiration* of my being. My *desire* is moved by an external object or good, even if it is present only in my mind. The *aspiration* is the pure dynamism of my person, unadulterated by any other motivation. If I stop and observe myself, if I bring silence to my life, if I purify myself of all ambition, including the ambition to be, then I shall discover that the task is as simple as it is difficult.

Without meditation or contemplation, one cannot even see this path. And so I discover that it is not a question of saving anything of what I now think I am, or of prolonging the existence of any aspect of *my* being, because there is no "self" (*atta*, *ātman*). *Sabbe dhamma anattā*, "All dharma is without *ātman*, without [ontological] substance," says the *Vinaya* and other texts; any desire to substantialize Being is useless, because it does not exist. All phenomena are empty (*śūnya*); they exist only in relation and dependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*): pure dynamism.

"Contingence" is radical. Every "Must-Being," in its metaphysical and not just moral sense, is insubstantial; it is a projection of our mind, which cannot help thinking that Being is what my mind thinks Must-Be. It is the experience of complete emptiness to which Buddha invites me; I may call it "contemplation," and in the Buddhist tradition it is called enlightenment or the awakening to reality—which is empty.

All the same, I cannot be limited by mere "theory" or by simple mental exercises. Reading a prescription and taking a medicine are two different things altogether. What follows is a mistrust of pure speculation. I cannot become lost in "theologies or philosophies"; I must get into practice—a practice that arises spontaneously from within me. I have to take to the path in order to free myself from this deep dissatisfaction, from this suffering inherent in my existence. The path is not revealed without contemplation, and it is not contemplation if it is not nourished by practice. These are two sides of the same coin. This is the "Eightfold Path."

### *Aṭṭhangikamagga*

The Pāli language has an exquisite ambivalence. The path (*magga*, or *mārga* in Sanskrit) is *aṭṭhangata*, the return to the homeland, to the origin, to rest, or to *nirvāṇa*; it is a path toward the elimination of the path itself. The middle path is the "Eightfold Path." It is a harmonious path that seeks harmony in human activity—symbolized in the meditative pathways of various schools. Because it is hard to reduce it to just a few words, here I shall give a number of equivalences (without getting into academic considerations). However, we need the polyvalence of words in order

to avoid limiting the experience to one single meaning. The key word is *sammā* (*samyak* in Sanskrit). It means connection, what is straight, sufficient, complete, and finite—basically harmony and concord—and therefore avoids extremes. The English word “same” comes from this root, as do the Latin *similis*, *simul*, and *semel*, with the prefix *san-* that means *con-*junction.

This, therefore, is the “noble path that leads to the abolition of pain”:

1. *Sammā diṭṭhi*—right vision, perfect evaluation, pure faith, correct intuition, balanced and complete
2. *Sammā sankappo*—right intention, perfect thought, pure will, adequate presentation
3. *Sammā vāco*—right discourse, correct word, pure language
4. *Sammā kammanto*—right conduct, correct action, harmonious activity
5. *Sammā ājīvo*—right way of life, correct kind of life, pure means of existence, harmonious life
6. *Sammā vāyāmo*—right effort, correct application
7. *Sammā sati*—right conscience, pure self-knowledge, undistorted memory
8. *Sammā samādhi*—right concentration, pure ecstasy, perfect contemplation

This language cannot be any clearer. The root of pain is in our attachment to existence, to our being. We therefore need to eliminate it. There is nothing else. It is the path of nothingness that opens up gradually as we move along the Eightfold Path and make it our own. I am able to eliminate my own contingency. It is a path of pure faith and opens us up to *nirvāṇa*—*nibbāna* in Pāli.

### *Nibbāna*

Any idea or concept of the ultimate “goal” of Man, the ultimate state of reality, and the ultimate stage of life is pure imagination and deforms the truth. Whoever is afraid of death is attached to his ego, no matter what rational arguments he uses to cover it up. The Buddhist experience is a radical one. To assert that behind or within my ego there is still something that can be salvaged as “mine” (my ego) is a rational subterfuge that comes from the fear of death. *Nibbāna* is not of the individual. The individual is insubstantial. The language of *nibbāna* tells us that there is no experience of it as such, because that would stain its absolute power. There is no *nibbāna*, but we see the reality of its absence. At the same time, we realize that the experience of this emptiness is the goal of everything: once we are emptied of everything, nothing remains. We cannot distinguish between *nibbāna* and nothingness. Hence the deep insight that *saṃsāra* is *nibbāna*. To repeat: It is not that *nibbāna* is hiding behind *saṃsāra*, behind this world, but that there is no way to separate the two. We can distinguish them if we appeal to a tribunal that is distant from both and that could conceptually discriminate between them. This would be the role of reason. But no one has given jurisdiction to such a tribunal, except reason

itself as a self-appointed judge. This is what reason, rooted in *saṃsāra*, does. From the perspective of *nibbāna*, however, the distinction does not even exist. This is the experience of a mystic as a "normal" person.

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The experience of Life according to Buddhism could be reduced to three visions: constitutive dissatisfaction, "working diligently for our salvation," and hope in a leap in the dark. The path, therefore, is already the destination. From there comes the peace (traditional in Buddhism) that the Buddha radiates forth.

### The Secular Language

Following the historical events in Western culture of the last decades, it is usual to fall victim to the confusion (not only linguistically speaking) of identifying the "religious" with the denominational—that is, the membership of a particular institution. Before this period, in the West, as in many other traditional cultures, every activity had a sacred dimension. Because of a craving for specialization and the ambition of "religious" institutions to rule over peoples' entire lives, there emerged movements for the emancipation from "religious" institutions, which had hitherto monopolized the sacred dimension of existence. Something analogous to this, *mutatis mutandis*, happened when Buddhism first started to appear in the heart of the religions of India. This was the origin of the *laïcité* that became popular after the French Revolution. "Nous sommes des missionnaires laïques," wrote Voltaire; his words would later be associated with secularity. Strictly speaking, the opposite of sacred is profane and not secular. There is a *sacred secularity*, as I have tried to explain elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

In short, there is a vision of the secular world that is just as sacred as any other vision rigorously defined as "religious." This secularity sees the *saeculum* (the age), material, and therefore spatio-temporal, reality as the ultimate and definitive reality—and therefore as mysterious, infinite (that is, sacred), and I would add, also religious, since the religious institutions do not have a monopoly on religion. "All those who have lived according to the *logos* are Christians, even if I consider them atheists," wrote the first "Christian philosopher" St. Justin the martyr, in the second century.

Precisely because the secular language speaks of this world as of something ultimate and definitive, we realize that it cannot express it adequately: we are faced with the mystery—or, ultimately, with mysticism. To clarify: The fact that secularity is ultimate and definitive does not mean it is the only ultimate and definitive thing. Reality has three dimensions—the cosmotheandric dimensions.

We can describe this language with the help of three symbols.

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<sup>2</sup> R. Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience. Emerging Religious Consciousness*. Edited with introduction by Scott Eastham. Maryknoll (Orbis) 1993. First Indian Edition, Delhi, (Motilal Banarsidass) 1998.

### *The Human Situation*

I have deliberately used this term, which comes from an ambivalent and controversial etymology that suggests, on the one hand, abandon, negligence, and decay, and on the other, being seated or situated, and also lost, in this world (*situs*, φθίνω [*phthino*], *kṣināri*, etc.). This is the ambivalent *situation* of Man, and it is partly stable and partly provisory. The secular language does not take refuge in transcendence, nor is it satisfied by immanence or by the immediately given. This language speaks of restlessness, or even of anguish and disorientation, because there is no pole star to guide us. If there is a God, he remains silent and "leaves the world for men to fight over," as the Bible itself says with a scandalous show of indifference. Perhaps it is better to deny God, because otherwise we should have to declare him a "perverse God." Precisely because there is no external and transcendent consolation, the human situation left to itself recognized only the "law of the jungle." We have to resort to pragmatism and establish some rules.

In past times, Progress—that is, the faith in a better Future—was a substitute for a God who, like the future, could not be seen, but which, at least, we could perceive and in which we could "hope" to be incarnated. In any case, the myth of God-Progress is falling apart, at least for the most part, in the modern world. The situation of today's world does not allow for this belief. This world has to be taken seriously, and we can no longer think we will have a better future through the sacrifice of the present generation. Holocausts are not required.

If the Past is already over, and the Future is dark and problematical, then "we" shall not be able to "exploit" it. And so we have to concentrate on the Present, penetrating more deeply into it and not into what it can give of itself. The secular language is not necessarily pessimistic; it calls itself "realist" because it refuses to manipulate the *saeculum* as a function of another hypothetical world, with horizontal or vertical transcendence, or of a historical future or an eschatological heaven.

This world is as it is, and we have to learn to live in it without alienating dreams that will sap our energy and our interest in transforming it.

When reduced to himself, Man discovers two tendencies: the intellectual that pushes him toward the *unknown* and the loving that drives him toward *happiness*. These are the two great symbols of the secular language.

### *The Unknown*

Not only is the world an enigma, but Man is, too; we only know a tiny part of reality. The field of the unknown is not far short of infinite, despite all the knowledge we have acquired, and it is so more in breadth than in depth. We cannot overcome our limitations, but just by recognizing them we have already admitted that something unknown exists beyond the frontiers of our knowledge. We are constantly extending these frontiers, but it would seem that the more we advance through uncharted lands, the more the horizon of the unknown recedes.



The secular language is reluctant to make a leap over the frontiers of the world and fly up into a common and mysterious sky; it does not want to be a smuggler. One must walk on the earth with one's feet firmly on the ground. Our *situs* is the earth, the human situation. And yet the unknown disturbs us, and at times we lose patience because we cannot wait for the solution or the answer in a future that we will not personally reach, or that simply will not arrive. I can wait to know the nature of electricity, just as humanity waited for centuries to see what was on the other side of the moon. But I cannot wait to know all the effects of my actions and the results of my behavior in order to make a particular decision. Can I rationally decide without knowing if my action will have good or bad results, perhaps for me as well? But what is good and what is evil? Here we are faced with the mystery, and the mystery has no answers. In other words, the secular language may not be a religious language in the strict sense, but that does not mean it ceases to be a mystical language: instinct, trust, conscience . . . these are all words that need a third eye in order to be active.

Because we are of this world, and our world is (also) our homeland, we cannot abandon our rationality; what we cannot explain by reason scandalizes us. We require rational answers but we do not find them. Therefore we have to build gratuitous and unproven postulates in order to deduce our vision of the world rationally. In a word, we cannot get rid of what has been given us—the gratuitous, the mystery. This will become more apparent in the third point that follows.

### *Happiness*

"*Sapiens beatus est*" (The wise man is happy), said Cicero, expressing a virtually universal idea. Something innate in Man drives him toward happiness, without the need to know first what happiness is—although we do discover early on that the satisfaction of our primary urges does not necessarily procure it. Little by little we realize that only love satisfies our dynamism toward a fullness that constantly eludes us. This desire for happiness is thirst for the infinite. And the infinite we can never reach; we would only be making it finite.

There are countless synonyms for happiness in all languages: joy, pleasure, satisfaction, euphoria, jubilation, and so on. Each term has its connotations and its enlightening etymologies. Here we have chosen "happiness" because of its relationship with fecundity and fruitfulness; that is to say, to express the fullness—and therefore the perfection—of the person, without specifying what it is and where it is to be found, but just as something that, wherever it comes from, arises within ourselves and is our fruit. Happy is he who produces fruit, whose life is ample and full. Happiness can be a gift; it can come from outside, but it must also arise from within us and fill our being. This longing is constitutive of Man. There is a thirst for happiness inside us.

We are not content with gratuitous projections of unfulfilled desires. Our language is constantly confronted by the enigma of the universe, and enigmatic words hide what they mean with the terms themselves; they are literally enigmatic. The sense

of mystery is inherent in the secular language. Brought to its natural conclusion, it is a mystical language.

Let us hand over once again to a poet, in this case Nietzsche:

*Schild der Notwendigkeit!*  
*Höchstes Gestirn des Seins!*  
 —das kein Wunsch erreicht  
 —das kein Nein befleckt,  
 —ewiges Ja des Seins,  
 —ewig bin ich dein Ja:  
 —denn ich liebe dich, o Ewigkeit!

Shield of necessity!  
 Highest constellation of Being!  
 —that no desire reaches  
 —that no negation stains,  
 —eternal Yes of Being,  
 —eternally I am your Yes:  
 —because I love you, O Eternity!

Or, as he has Zarathustra say,

*O Mensch! Gib acht!*  
 [...] *[...]*  
*Die Welt ist tief,*  
*und tiefer als der Tag gedacht.*  
*Tief ist ihr Weh—,*  
*Lust—tiefer noch als Herzeleid:*  
*Weh spricht: Vergeh!*  
*Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit—,*  
*—will tiefer, tiefer Ewigkeit!*

O man! Beware!  
 [...] *[...]*  
 The world is deep,  
 conceived deeper than the day.  
 Deep in its pain—,  
 Pleasure—deeper than the heart's pain:  
 The pain says: Pass!  
 But every pleasure wants eternity—,  
 —ever deeper eternity.

The secular experience of Life takes this world very seriously and reacts against any "leaks" and gratuitous consolations. It is realist because it accepts the data as real, and it is heroic because it approaches contingency with dignity.

The secular man wants to take his place in this world, but he realizes immediately that all its structures escape him. He is truly *secular*—that is to say, temporal—and as such he does not want to lose time, but that, too, escapes him and he cannot hold it back. He would like to cut through it, but he ends up with mystery, with mysticism.

### The Christian Language

The previous languages, with a few exceptions, do not tend to make the claim of *exclusive* truth. Some mystical expressions, of course, may give the impression that their respective descriptions are superior or that they encompass all others, but in general they do not claim exclusivity. The Christian language, in contrast, especially that of the theorists, often gives the impression that it is claiming to be the only completely true one. Therefore, we should clarify this issue at the outset.

The question is a legitimate and revealing one: it reveals its dependence on the culture that produced it. In fact, the *specific difference* of Christian mysticism is studied as synonymous with the *essence* of mysticism, which presupposes the particular way of thinking just alluded to. After the resurrection Peter asks Jesus, "And him, Lord?" referring to John, and already showing his need for differentiation. The Master gives a sharp reply, "What does it matter to you?"

From the standpoint of Western culture, the essence of mysticism would be what is specifically mystical, and its Christian essence would be the truth contained in it—a specific truth identified with a generic truth, since there cannot be two truths. Reflecting on the essence of Christian mysticism is taken to mean reflecting on genuine mysticism and its essence. And so Christian mysticism would therefore be true mysticism. But the question arises: Are there other mysticisms that are equally true? If we reply to this without understanding the scope of the question, we fall into the chronic misunderstanding of interreligious dialogue, especially between Christianity and other religions, since the Christian claim to truth must necessarily appear as a claim to universality and thus a flagrant example of religious imperialism. This has indeed happened more than once, especially when the encounter has moved away from its mystical dimension. The question of the essence of Christian mysticism, based on this assumption, would mean looking for true mysticism, given that what is not Christian mysticism is not true mysticism; this conclusion has in fact been defended by certain theologians. Here we see the importance of interculturality, and the trap of multiculturalism, as that leads to the trap of relativism.

To repeat: If by "Christian mysticism" we mean a specifically Christian interpretation of mysticism, then a question arises over the validity of other interpretations. If the response is negative, then we have an absolutist single answer that claims validity for all cultures by virtue of an *a priori* premise that the other cultures do

not recognize as such—and that is not therefore a valid premise. With a positive response we give the impression of relativizing the Christian experience as one among many others—against Christianity's own understanding of itself, which is "universal" (catholic).

We cannot avoid the issue, though we may risk accentuating the tensions among religions (which cannot and should not be disassociated from their respective cultures) and also contributing to the lack of peace in the world. The question is also important from a political standpoint, given that the claim of universality that Christianity itself is now beginning to deal with critically is being replaced by the aggressive claim of universality on the part of the modern technical-scientific culture. Could it be that what was once a Christian *mythos* is now the modern scientific *mythos*? Is it not the case that we speak of "development" and "democracy," and also of "science," as universal values (*mythoi*)?

If the essence of Christian mysticism is not its specific difference but rather what makes it truly mystical, then its characteristics will be those of every true mysticism, albeit with a number of distinctive details; and, above all, it will have a specifically different language, but one that is ultimately particular.

The price of truth is paid in the renunciation of the claim to truth as private property—that is, as specific or exclusive. As a Father of the Latin Church said, and St. Thomas recalled, "*Omne verum a quocumque dicatur, a Spirito Sancto est*" (All truth, whoever expresses it, comes from the Holy Spirit). However, any formulation of the truth is contextual. To Pilate's provocative question about truth, Christ answered with silence.

In fact, the different interpretations of mysticism are characterized by the language that gives them their cultural frame. It follows that we need to be able to formulate the experience in the Christian language of today. But the problem still remains. What does "Christian language" mean? The language of Christian writers? Which ones, where, and when (given that they are quite diverse)? The language of a Karl Barth is not that of an Evagrio Pontico. And further, the irony of the Holy Spirit has placed all the emphasis on not converting his message into a "book religion." This was noticed by, among others, Thomas Aquinas, when he illustrated the reasons why Jesus left no writings (so that we would not forget the mystical experience). It is mysticism that says every religion is a religion of the living word and not of the written word—which kills when left to itself.

Let us clarify: The issue here is not with the mystical experience, but with its Christian formulation. According to an ancient *sūtra*, it is meaningless to qualify the experience (*e*) with any adjective. What is meaningful is to seek to follow the opposite path and examine whether a given interpretation is consistent with what the Christian tradition has understood as such (*E*). But, short of storing tradition in a doctrinal low-temperature freezing vessel so that it will not get corrupted, we cannot say if the formulation of the Christian experience must always necessarily be the same. The Holy Spirit does not only "renew the face of the earth" but replaces it altogether, and heaven as well.

To summarize, the question of Christian mysticism is a legitimate one in that it concerns my own interpretation, and I should not avoid it by resorting to a general answer. This is because, in the first place, such a general answer does not actually exist. But in the second place, and more importantly, the interpretation of the Christian experience is not the experiential faith that mysticism deals with. The mystical experience is certainly an experience of faith, but the latter cannot be identified with its interpretation—as was recognized by none other than St. Thomas himself when he repeatedly wrote that *"actus autem credentis non terminatur ad enuntiabile sed ad rem"* (the act of the believer does not end in the utterable but in the thing). In the third place, given that the experience of faith is the most intimate thing in Man, and *"De internis non iudicat Ecclesia"* (The church does not judge interior acts), faith as an experience cannot be interpreted: there is no interpretation of faith, but only of its translation, and that requires an interpretative criterion and a common language.

Since we are speaking of experience I ought to mention, as with the previous languages, my own personal experience. "Personal" here does not mean "individual," and so it may be shared, and also somehow communicated, even if only by resonance.

\*

The symbol of Christian mysticism can be summed up in a single name: Jesus Christ. I do not just say "Jesus," or only "Christ." I refer to the experience of all reality seen in and through the experience of this historical and transhistorical figure called Jesus Christ: son of the Father and son of Mary, God, and Man—in an a-dual unity.

I would also reduce the Christian language to three symbols. In defining them as symbols I do not deny that they are also facts—historical facts—but neither do I reduce them to that. The incarnation, for example, occurred in time but is not an exclusively temporal fact. As we have already said, mysticism frees us from spatio-temporal reductionism.

St. John tells us that "he heard and saw what was from the beginning," overcoming, with his experience, time, and space. It is also obvious that the interpretation of my experience has to pass through a lens with the thickness of twenty centuries—though its glass was formed millennia before. Experience, however, makes this lens transparent; otherwise it would not be experience, but seeing the lens (and what is reflected or refracted in it) but not reality. Still, there is no reason not to keep the lens in my language.

### *Incarnation*

The *fons et origo totius divinitatis*—the fount and origin of all reality, as the expression of various Toledan councils could be construed—in the very act of generating its icon (which some call *logos* and others "Son," and also other names in other traditions) "creates" the cosmos, manifests itself in history, and is incarnated in a man whom tradition calls the second Adam (the primordial Man who came before Abraham);

his function is to "complete" the divine work (*opus creationis*) in time and space in order to bring to its culmination the adventure of reality (*opus restaurationis*), which some refer to as "redemption" and others prefer to call "divinization," "glorification," and many other names.

In time, it has been granted to Man to "see" the entire reality of this adventure in the *logos*, incarnate in the womb of a woman who gave birth to Jesus two millennia ago. This fact would not have been a problem for the Greeks, who discovered that Man is a microcosm; nor to the Hindūs, who learn in their *śruti* that the *puruṣa*, or primordial Man, is all reality; nor to the Buddhists, who believe in the Buddhist nature of everything; nor to the Taoists, who proclaim that the Tao is omnipresent; nor to the African cultures, which are individualistic. The only difficulty arises in individualized analytical thought, which has developed the rigor of conceptual thought by paying the price of reducing symbolic thought to a state of atrophy. This is not so much a digression as a clarification about the language of experience that used words as symbols and not exclusively as concepts. One cannot believe in the incarnation of God in the son of Mary unless one sees it as the "revelation of the silent mystery from time immemorial"—according to the letter to the Romans. The formulation of Tanabe, a philosopher of the School of Kyoto, perhaps clarifies better what I mean: "Rational faith does not mean a faith based on reason, but a faith mediated by reason"—where reason means the intellect.

The complete experience of Jesus Christ leads to the discovery of the truth of what Christian tradition affirms (the words of Thomas Aquinas), that with one single act God creates the World and generates the Word—as we have just described. Transcendence can be experienced only starting from immanence, and immanence as such is experienced only against the backdrop of transcendence. The two experiences are correlative; it is an a-dual experience.

In Jesus Christ's experience of reality we have the insight that God and the cosmos are not two things or two beings. Jesus Christ therefore could not be fully Man and totally God. The experience of Jesus Christ reveals to us that there exists a real Man, who is at the same time body (Matter) as I am, and divine (Spirit) as I aspire to be. It is the experience that God is human and Man is divine—even though Man still has to become divine, not by mere participation but by communion (*κοινωνία*, *koinōnia*) with the divine nature, as St. Peter says.

God and the cosmos are not one (one thing) but two (two beings). What distinguishes them is intellect, and what separates them is time—until God will be "all in all" (and so the scar of temporality remains). In this interval there are not just the "banished children of Eve" but also the children rejected by the Father. In addition, there are the "sons of perdition," since the theo-anthro-cosmic adventure is not automatic—it is free. We discover the Abyss and Fullness, we suffer Absence, and we enjoy Presence simultaneously—"simul iustus et peccator," as Martin Luther said, although in a different context: at the same time just and sinner.

The incarnation is not only the divinization of a man (and with him of all Man) but also the humanization of God (and with him of all divinity). We would not be

able to see this *perichoresis* if we had not discovered the Trinity. That is why by seeing the "Son of Man" we can see the Father (of man). They are not one, since they are different, and the difference is real; but they are not two, since the one cannot "be" without the other: they are in constitutive polarity. This is the oft-mentioned a-dual vision or *advaita*. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father"—notwithstanding that "no one has seen God" (as a separate entity). A Father who is not a Father is an abstraction. A God who is not Man does not exist—and here I take a lead from the Councils (for the more scrupulous reader) and not only from the mystics. Correspondingly, however, and at the same time, whoever has not seen the Father has not seen Jesus Christ, but has mistaken him for a mere mortal. But we cannot stop here. Whoever *sees* the Father in Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ in the Father does not see a distinct God who is also a man (God does not have parts); nor do they see a distinct man who is also God (Christ is not a schizophrenic half-man half-God). Whoever does not see the Father in Christ cannot see Christ in those who are "thirsty or naked." The Christian a-dual vision does not see a God outside Christ, nor a Christ outside God; it does not see Matter that is not divine, nor a God who is not corporeal, even though it does not confuse the three dimensions of reality: the cosmotheandric experience is the modern translation of the radical Trinity that tradition called Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (in which gender does not mean sex).

The patristic saying that God became man so that Man could become God is not a pious metaphor, but a rigorous interpretation of what is stated in St. John's prologue and of the unanimous Christian tradition. God does not become, but *is* Man, and he gives each of us the chance to become what we are not yet. It is the mystery of time.

### Cross

I shall not repeat or summarize here the ideas of a book called *Mysterium Crucis* that I wrote in 1948, but which is still awaiting its *kairos* in order to be published. Instead I shall concentrate just on the problem regarding language as an expression of Christian mysticism.

The enigma of Life remains inexplicable, but has a symbol: Jesus Christ. In him there is present not only the "fullness of divinity" but also of "evil." Evil is incomprehensible, but so is good. Evil is opaque and therefore cannot be understood, while good is blinding and thus it, too, cannot be grasped. Pain causes ugliness, but it also purifies. Joy is ennobling but also degrading. Reality is incomprehensible, but it is there in front of us. The Christian language cannot escape speaking about the experience of the cross, of good and of evil, of pleasure and pain, of joy and sadness, of humility and pride, of tenderness and contempt, of reconciliation and sin. The experience of the cross is an experience of death and resurrection, of pain and hope. The classical term, which the *Vedas* have helped me understand, is sacrifice as an exchange ("trade" as the Latin liturgy calls it) between Divinity and Humanity through the immolation of Life for its resurrection; in physics it is

called transformation of energy: in biology, the law of evolution; and in theology, Eucharist (subject to the relative distances between them). The cross, I wrote more than fifty years ago, is not a symbol of pain or of death, but the immolation of Life, which is what I called the cross in the Trinity. "Greater love has no Man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

The first vision (incarnation), which is rather idyllic, very cosmic, but certainly mysterious, is counterbalanced, challenged, and often contested by the experience of the cross. The cross makes us live the human condition in all its brutality until death and in all its glory until Life—revealing that the "human condition" is also the divine situation. The experience of the cross does not just involve the body—the source of pleasure and of pain, the "body of death" and of resurrection—but also includes my experience of contingency: I do not sustain myself but rather I rely on the Infinite (divine) even if only in one tangential point (contingence). In this experience I discover that I am not alone: tears and smiles, sadness and joy make me open my arms to others. And yet they do not satisfy me—either in a positive or a negative sense. I also aspire to opening myself to a vertical transcendence, but it does not respond, stays silent, and does not help me; I feel abandoned. I hear the cry of desperation in Jesus's native dialect that the onlookers did not understand. It came right up from his belly: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" And here, unlike on other occasions, "his" God is silent and abandons him.

I write about my experience without laborious exegesis. I perceive, in this cry, the final liberation of Jesus. Until this point, he was a Jew speaking mainly to his fellow Jews and therefore with the language of his tradition. He had trusted in YHWH (Yahweh) and now YHWH was abandoning him. In this extreme moment, Jesus in turn frees himself of YHWH, does not invoke him, and commends his spirit to his Father, who is the Source, the Origin, the Silence. It is significant that a pagan, the Roman centurion, seemed to have understood that this was really the "Son of God"—son of a God that for the Roman certainly was not YHWH. In that precise instant the "veil of the Temple" of the Old Covenant was torn in two. Jesus dies and Jesus Christ rises again. "Christians" are not the only ones to have discovered Jesus Christ.

I do not see my interpretation as a subterfuge in order to stay within the orthodoxy of this church, "created before the sun and the moon"—to quote the voice of patristic tradition that spoke of the "cosmic mystery of the Church," until the Second Vatican Council, which describes it as "the mystery of the world" (*sacramentum mundi*). I do not need to rely on so-called apophatic theology, nor on Oriental mysticism, to formulate my experience, and indeed I do not present it as the only interpretation of the "God" of Jesus Christ. And yet I cannot hide three elements of doubt. The first is that much suffering caused by the absence and the silence of God on the part of our Western mystics could have been avoided—though this does not mean we have not transformed those sufferings into purification. The second is that this experience of a monotheistic God, not only "hidden" and



"silent," but also inexistent as an individual substance, could perhaps be a bridge toward other non-Abrahamic spiritualities. Needless to say, the idea of the Trinity is neither Trinitarianism nor polytheism. The third doubt is that, by recognizing the radical historical (and not only mystical) novelty of Christ, who was justly condemned by the Jews according to their Law, the notorious stain of Christian history—anti-Semitism—would not have emerged with the virulence that it did. It is irritating for the Jews to be told that they are just precursors of a religion that reaches its perfection in another.

In calling the cross an essential symbol of language, we refer to the "change of values" (*Umwertung aller Werte*) that this language represents—the cross not as a symbol of pain or defeat, nor of vindication or victory, but as a language of transformation and of triumph over the historical categories by which the modern West, especially, tends to judge the human condition. And that is the subject of our third symbol.

### *Resurrection*

The cross is widely interpreted as pain and death, but also as a path to resurrection, as in the chants of the Latin liturgy, especially in the Easter season: Christ "*mortem moriendo destruxit*" and right after that, "*et vitam resurgendo reparavit*" (by dying he destroyed death and by rising he restored life). Clearly we are not dealing with physical causality, but with a *perichoresis*, a constitutive correlation of all reality. If my life is a sacrifice, in the real and traditional sense, by dying I rise and by rising I restore the quality of life—I transform my biological life into a life that is more fully human, that is, divine (without thereby ceasing to be human). There is a *perichoresis* that is as human as it is cosmic—and not only "intra-Trinitarian." In the radical Trinity there is no interior or exterior, because it embraces all, as I have tried to explain elsewhere.

I could formulate the experience of the resurrection using two more liturgical texts. I use these two texts because I find my own experience articulated in them, but I refrain from any scholarly exegesis of them.

The first text is the revelation of the angel to the women who were looking for Jesus at the tomb: ἡγέρθη, οὐκ ἔστιν ὧδε (*egerthe, ouk estin hōde*); *surrexit, non est hic*; "he is risen, he is not here." He is neither here nor there; in fact he is not in any here or there; he cannot be located or found in any place. "Where were you hiding?" as the tearful Mary Magdalen asked, and St. John of the Cross sang.

I would have felt disoriented, not to say desperate, like the women who fled in fear from the tomb, had I not been to the Upper Room and to the Temple, and heard with my own ears (and not secondhand from an angel), this time in the liturgy, "*Surrexi et adhuc tecum*" (I am risen and with you). I will not find him outside: he is within and lives inside as the Scriptures say and numerous mystics repeat. He is hiding in the depths of my heart. Angelus Silesius, in a poetical reprise of a current image, wrote,

*Wird Christus tausendmal zu Bethlehem geboren  
und nicht in dir: du bleibst noch ewiglich verloren.*

Were Christ born a thousand times in Bethlehem  
but not in you, you would be lost forever.

I am not attracted by any gnostic interpretation of the resurrection, and I have no interest in finding out what happened to the body of Jesus. Instead, I want to understand my own resurrection—though I do believe it has something to do with his, too. If the Christian feast of Easter celebrates his resurrection, the feast of Pentecost celebrates ours. The Christian feasts are more than simple commemorations; they are reenactments. The liturgy is not just ceremony. On various occasions during his earthly life Jesus said, “You remain in me and I in you.” He did not go back “to heaven,” and when his disciples asked him to “stay with us for evening is falling,” he stayed with them—intimately. This is why he disappeared from their sight. It is the third eye that reveals his presence.

It is not easy to describe an experience of resurrection. A simple way could be to resort to the words of St. Paul when he says that it is not he who lives, but Christ in him, or to cite the mystery of the Eucharist. All words, though, hide as much as they reveal. To summarize: We cannot speak of an experience after death if the “after” is a linear timeline. I have no experience after death, but I do have experience of resurrection. What else does Paul intend when he says, after Isaiah, “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead” (ἀνάστα, *anasta*), and Christ “will shine on you” (ἐπιφάυσει σοι, *epiphausei soi*, “*illuminabit tibi*,” as the Vulgate accurately translates)? We may therefore go on to mention three points without lacking in discretion.

1. The experience of the resurrection is not the experience of a life that is private property—my own *bios*. The risen life is not mine: it is not my life. It is experience of Life, of the Life that is and was from the Beginning, that simply lives, that beats in all reality and with which I enter into communion in order to live with this Life (*zōē*). This implies (and requires) being dead to the ego, letting egoism perish, along with all that goes with it. I live this Life to the extent that I die to the self that is not myself. Without death there is no resurrection, and resurrection is Life. This experience of Life is the “eternal life” that Christ speaks of (ζωή, not βίος). It is necessary to “lose” one’s life or soul (ψυχή, *psychē*) in order to rise again. This is not an illusion or a second life, but the fullness of Life: “I came that they might have Life” (*zōē*), and have it more fully (περισσόν, *perisson*)—compared to the mere biological life. My risen life is not a second life; it is not a reincarnation in another person, not another life (*non alia sed altera*), but it is the life that was given me to live in what we have called “tempiternity.” We experience tempiternity when we live “eternal life” in the temporal moments of our existence. It is not a life after time or outside space, but it is not solely governed by spatio-temporal parameters. When these temporal moments, without ceasing to be temporal, “reveal” themselves to be “eternal,” we begin to live the eternal life that is risen life. We should not forget

that "eternal" does not mean "everlasting": eternity does not last in time; it is not forever. I am also aware of the fact that I am describing the entry into eternal life and its "potential in obedience" for every human being. These are intense moments that do not crave repetition or prolongation, as they are incommensurable with temporality. They are temporal moments that have, as it were, perforated time and are lived fully in another dimension: this is the mystical experience of the moment. They are not necessarily ecstatic moments, nor indeed strictly "ex-chronic," since they are lived in time. They are tempiternal, and they may be more or less intense and conscious, but they are accessible to "everyone who comes into this world" (though not all are ready to receive the light). "But to all those who received him he gave power to become children of God." It would be superfluous to add that there is a homeomorphic equivalence between "risen," "enlightened," "realized," and the like. Christian optimism is virtually a dogma, as I wrote half a century ago, in the language of the time.

2. The risen life does not mean perfect life. I have to try to eliminate my imperfections; I am not sinless; I experience and take part in the divine Life, but I do not stop being the man that I am, with all my faults and weaknesses. This does not take away the fact that I call it "divine Life," because God is also Man, and he partakes in my human life.

Those who are risen know they are sinners, but also know they are forgiven and that they have not yet fully manifested what they are—to paraphrase St. John. For this reason, despite their errors and limitations, the risen ones enjoy a deep peace and experience the presence of the Spirit (the one who brings forgiveness and peace) with them.

We should be quite clear: the risen life is not a second life, an extension of our human life. Fortunately we have overcome the "natural-supernatural" dichotomy. We could simply say that the risen life is the life that does not follow the body or the soul, but the Spirit—which of course does not exist separately from the body or the soul. In a word, what we call here the risen life is the fully human life—in all its richness and ambivalence.

3. The experience of resurrection takes away the fear of death, and this is perhaps its most visible aspect, since the fear of death cannot be overcome through willpower alone. However, it is also something more than just Platonic immortality. I know I am mortal, and I am not comforted by the knowledge that I have an immortal soul if I am going to be separated from it at a future point. Neither am I satisfied with believing I shall rise again after death or perhaps in some final moment that I shall not be able to experience. The experience of resurrection is here and now—in tempiternity. Those who are risen live the novelty of life in every instant. They do not get bored or anxious about time passing. Is this not the work of the Spirit that "makes all things new"? Resurrection is an act that is in constant renewal. If we die every day, as the apostle says, we rise again in every moment. The experience of continuous creation, and even more so of continuous Incarnation, brings with it that of resurrection in every instant. Buddhism can perhaps help us understand it

better. Death holds no fear because death is not. Indeed, the vision of the *Upaniṣads* would allow us to express it in a complementary way, but this is not the place to introduce the wisdom of other cultures.

### The Mystical Meta-Language

By way of summary, the center of gravity of the Hindū language is the divine; of the Buddhist language, Man; of secular language, the world; and of Christian language, Christ, the Man-God.

I may be accused of oversimplification by giving my personal interpretation of these languages. I accept that, but I would add that the interpretation is legitimate and does not violate the fundamental insights of the various worldviews. Language itself is eminently personal.

We have already said that there is no single mystical language because every mystical experience is expressed in the language of the culture that frames it, giving it the means to express the particular experience of the mystic, and therefore conditioning the language. We have also said that the mystic experiences language simultaneously as the means, the tool, and the obstacle that he needs, but that also impedes him, in expressing what from the beginning is revealed as ineffable, but that, in the absence of other means, he has to use, while straightaway admitting that it is not what he would want or mean to say. This very expression, though, is not entirely correct, and the will (to verbalize) is not actually the right means for communicating what, in principle, is recognized as ineffable. The most appropriate means would be silence. But silence, too, is a relationship, and not in itself, as light is not in itself luminous. Silence is always silence for someone. Mystical silence is human silence. Silence is something more than absence of noise; it is absence of word. Silence is the way the monks of the first *saṅgha* traditionally replied to the sermons of the Buddha, in order to show what they had understood. Without an outer or inner interrogation there is no silence, but also vice versa: if there is no silence, the matrix of the word, then the word is not human and there is no word. Mystical language, therefore, is essentially symbolic; it conceals and reveals at the same time. We have already said that the symbol is such only when it symbolizes (to us); that is, when it creates a silent space where the symbol, the symbolizer, and the symbolized participate together. The symbol is and is not the "thing"; it is the dressing of the "thing" that cannot be expressed in its naked state, but that has no other or better means of being communicated except by drawing on words. Man, after all, is essentially *Homo loquens*, and transcends the word through the word, which can then only be understood by those capable of translating it into their own experience, with the consequent transformation that all translation entails. Equally, however, a glance, a kiss, or an embrace have to be understood before passing through the threshold of intelligence that will interpret them in its own way. According to a tradition (perhaps a late one), when the Buddha held up a flower in front of the assembly, only his favorite disciple Māhākāśyapa understood, and so Zen was born.

When we ask the meaning of the act, we always have to limit ourselves to our own interpretation—just as when we want to explain the meaning of a word. The word is primordial, as Bhartṛhari magnificently wrote. Even when we report the interpretations of others, we are reinterpreting them. We cannot go beyond our human condition. It is certain that only a mystic can understand another mystic, but a third mystic might understand him differently. We cannot eliminate interpretation.

As the *Rg-veda* says,

What I am, I know not  
I walk alone under the weight of my mind;  
when the First-born of the Truth comes near  
he is revealed in the Word itself.

—that Word that was from the Beginning.

To put it another way, there is no single hermeneutical key for understanding mystical language; in fact, one is not needed. This brings us to repeat our usual definition: The mystical language is a meta-language. Even so, we need to use words, and words exist in a particular linguistic universe—but not the Word, which is the matrix of the universe, as one of the *Vedas* says.

We have just said that the mystical language is a symbolic language that envelops us in the silence of the word—albeit through the word itself. Mysticism used language as a symbol that points symbolically to what the initiated generally grasp—and it always does so indirectly, because the leap must be made to the ineffable. The mystic knows that the only thing that cannot be said is the only thing that is actually worth uttering in order to go in and out of the unknown land of the mystical dimension of reality.

Within the languages that we have selected for consideration, the first three offer less resistance to an interpretation that can cross their cultural frontiers than do the religions that have their basis in the Semitic cultural environment, and that are characterized by their essentially concrete nature. The divine, as well as the human or secular, permit legitimate extrapolations more easily than the Christian mentality with its Semitic influence and origins, which seems all too keen on the challenge of the particular. "Thou shalt have no other God before me."

We shall address the mystical interpretation of the Christian meta-language, not just because of the sociological fact that the majority of present-day Christians no longer belong to the Abrahamic cultural branch, but principally because mystical intelligibility has different parameters. It is not a coincidence that monotheistic mysticism is more marginalized relative to the cultural panoply of monotheistic believers than the mysticisms of other religions, which would find it difficult to accept a religion without the mystical dimension. On the other hand, the fact that mysticism has to justify itself critically helps avoid the danger of falling into its two main traps: sentimentalism and irrationalism. For these reasons we shall concentrate our attention on the Christian meta-language.

*Christus Totus*

The Christian language is meaningless without the Trinitarian vision of Divinity. We have already seen that the Trinitarian insight is not exclusively Christian, although it does have a particular Christian language that is perhaps more complete than many others. The Trinity is what makes it possible to say without contradiction that Christ is fully Man and fully God. The Christian language allows us to say that God is also corporeal and that we are temples of the Holy Spirit by our participation in the Christic mystery, which is the mystery of a divine body on the same level as an equally divine spirit. Christ's humanity is not "inferior" or secondary compared with his divinity. Christ is not divine first and human second. Within a rigid monotheism the full divinity of Christ has no sense. Part of the *kairos* of the third Christian millennium is to restore the primitive experience of the Trinity that is common to many other world religious traditions, however different they are from Christianity.

The experience of Jesus Christ allows us to say that our body is also divine or that human sentiments are not alien to the mystical experience. The so-called hypostatic union, although integral to an excessively monotheistic theology, is not simply a sterile *theologoumenon*.

I began with the *almost* tautological observation that the "Christian experience" is the experience of Jesus Christ. It only remains for me to define this quasi-tautology by saying that it has to do as much with the subjective genitive as with the objective genitive within the phrase. I have written a book<sup>3</sup> containing considerations about what Jesus's experience was (the subjective genitive). In this appendix our task is to explain the objective genitive: our experience of Jesus Christ.

I could formulate it by quoting another phrase from the Christian Epistles: "In him lives the fullness of Divinity bodily" (σωματικῶς, *somatikos*), a phrase that is completed by another from the same letter, which clarifies that we are dealing with all the fullness (πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα, *pan to pleroma*) and not just that of a separate God. In Jesus Christ is all corpority, humanity, and divinity in the fullest and most concrete form. This assertion would not make sense if we had not discovered his divine nature, which transcends space and time. Jesus Christ is divine. By analogy, however, we could not have known him with that "knowledge that is eternal life" if we did not share in the same humanity. Jesus Christ is human. This would all come down to a simple abstract intellection, were it not for the fact that his corpority is also ours, and is represented in the incarnation—and in the Eucharist. Jesus Christ is the (concrete) symbol of all reality—the symbol of the cosmotheandric experience. All reality is a *Christophany*, as I wrote more than fifty years ago.

This experience cannot be called solely Christocentric in the current (monotheistic) sense, because Christ himself is in reference to the Father and the Spirit. Nor is it theocentric, because he is also Body and Man. It is a Trinitarian experience, and the Trinity has no center.

<sup>3</sup> R. Panikkar, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

Neither can the experience of Jesus Christ be classified as personal or impersonal, as cognitive or sentimental. These categories of our intellect do not apply to experience. We cannot know Jesus Christ without loving him—otherwise we would be knowing just an idea. He cannot be loved without unitive knowledge, for then he would just be a psychological projection. We need (mystical) experience that integrates knowledge and love and transcends them—“*non tam conosciendi quam experiendi*” (not so much in the form of knowledge as of experience), as the *doctor mellifluus* said. And so we discover the living Christ of “today, yesterday, and always.” Only if he lives in me and I in him (subject to the relative distances, as in the case of the Trinity), and only if we are risen together (συνηγέρθητε, *synegerthete*) with him, can we partake of the experience. For this reason it was said that genuine theology requires the experience of faith—and also, I would add, of hope and love. Correspondingly, this experience of Jesus Christ topples from the foundations the almost classical distinction, made in a certain philosophy of religion, between monotheistic religions, which bring people to an experience of the “living God” (that is, personal), and the Asiatic religions that only bring people to an impersonal *Numen*. In Jesus Christ these two tendencies are reconciled. If, however, the personal God is Christ and he is the divine person, the other so-called persons (ὑποστάσεις, *hypostaseis*, as they are more consistently defined in Greek theology) are called by the same name in order to salvage the oneness of God, when in fact it is incorrect to give them that name. “Divine persons,” in traditional language, are infinitely distinct, and so not even the *analogia entis* can be attributed to them. Therefore even the term “person” is equivocal—as St. Thomas Aquinas understood. There *are not* three persons; there are not three (anything).

The experience of Jesus Christ is a Trinitarian experience, and the Trinity is not countable. Here we are in the total adventure of reality—in what I have called the *radical Trinity*, which is another way of defining the cosmotheandric experience. I do not need to quote the Scriptures (and not only the Christian ones) in order to be supported by them—although were it not for them I might not have used this language. But I do have to confess that all that I have written was not “revealed” to me in any Damascus-like scenario or by any special “enlightenment.” The dawn arrives discreetly, little by little, and announces the sun, which in turn does not reach its zenith all of a sudden. St. Peter says the same thing when he speaks of the “morning star that rises in our hearts.” Whoever has glimpsed the experience of Mount Tabor cannot confuse faith with the beliefs that express it—though this does not mean that other interpretations may not exist.

We are participants, *minutis minuendis*, in this *perichoresis* of the radical Trinity that is manifested in Jesus Christ. It is our participation and co-responsibility in the adventure of reality.

St. John of the Cross put it well:

Mine are the peoples. The just are mine and mine are the sinners. The angels are mine and the Mother of God and all things are mine. God himself is mine and for me, because Christ is mine and all for me. Therefore, what do you ask and seek, my soul? All this is yours and everything is for you.

This would be a self-centered aberration if we were not dead to our ego and "co-risen" with Christ.

The mystical experience of Jesus Christ leads us to assert that mysticism overcomes strict monotheism, but also that Christ is not a monopoly of Christians; Christ is the Christian, and therefore particular, name for the "silent mystery of tempiternity," made manifest in countless forms through the one "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and science"—and his name is Jesus Christ. It is a name that has the advantage of being concrete and not a conceptual abstraction, but also has the major disadvantage, after twenty centuries of exclusivist and often sectarian language, of suggesting to many a purely historical person who appears to have founded a particular religion or sect that, as such, was born by chance some centuries after Jesus of Nazareth, thus separating it from the Christ who was from the Beginning; if the confusion were an apostasy, the nondistinction would be heresy. It is not my task, however, to go down that path here.

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*In summary:* If one falls off a horse, albeit not on the road to Damascus, or awakes from a dream or simply from an accident, after a moment of disorientation—either of pain or pleasure—and suddenly has the experience of being alive, he has the pure awareness of this "I am alive!" even though later he will interpret it in the light of what he has experienced—loved and thought. The life of a man (*zōē*), says the Gospel, after criticizing *pleonexia* (the fact of wanting to have more than others), does not consist in what he possesses, but in what he *is*. And this *is*, stripped of everything that one *has*, including talents and health, is precisely Life. And so, to enjoy fully the experience of Life, each of us should be content with what he has. "Blessed are the poor in spirit"—because the Spirit has stripped them of all that they are not. "In Him was Life," says the good news of Jesus of Nazareth. This "him" is the "new and hidden name" that each one of us has to discover.

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*To recap:* We have started to describe mysticism as the integral human experience in which we include Matter just as much as Spirit. Man is not an isolated being, and his bond with the corporeal and the divine is constitutive. Man is just an abstraction. There is no Man without World and God, no God without World, and no World without God and Man. We can "think" them separately—that is, as abstractions of reality—but they are not real. This is the vision that we have called "cosmotheandric experience" (synonymous with theandrosomic, but that is rather cacophonous). We have used the word "reality," so as not to move too far away from common language, as a symbol of all that is, including its dialectical negation. But we have preferred to keep the title, which is suggestive that mysticism is the complete experience of Life in all its fullness.



## My Prayer

Cry  
but not to others  
—there is no Other.

Groan  
that does not dissolve  
—in its sense the suffering itself.

Question  
that does not expect  
—the universe will listen.

Joy  
that does not believe it is  
—cosmic happiness.

Song  
that is not sung  
—in itself fulfilled.

Breath  
that rises from the soul  
—like a sigh.

Weeping  
that torments the body  
—and cannot be hidden.

Prayer  
that is born in me  
—and so I cannot ask.

Shudder  
heard by my heart  
—that is absent from nothing.

Kiss  
ripe on the lips  
—that cannot say more.

Love  
that burns  
—not believing it is so.

My prayer asks pardon  
before it can begin,  
because not purified  
one chances not to love.

And it pains not knowing  
to whom it must ask.

A Gift it then meets  
That the Anointed is called  
of God as of Man.

Son of Man is his name;  
he is inside and out.  
One can weep with him  
but also rejoice.

My prayer is joy  
that hopes not more  
finding the absent  
in the moment present.

My prayer is to hear  
the harmony of spheres  
and their noises too.

Mute is my prayer,  
that cannot speak its heart  
and still it sees  
no absence is in prayer.

To what God does one turn  
since God is everywhere?

From what devil flee  
if fleeing is demonic?

To what angel turn  
if already the angel guards me?

My prayer is delight  
that hopes not more  
for every more is less  
when there is no more to hope.

My prayer is of hope  
that is already reached  
when one hopes no more.

My prayer is happiness  
of knowing I am peerless  
since every being is unique  
and there is no ideal model.

It is not dialogue,  
we are not two:  
it is not monologue,  
we are not one.  
Prayer is not silence,  
for it too is Word.

My prayer is my praying  
when I know no more;  
but only a breath  
of the same creation.

My prayer not only mine,  
but of all humanity is,  
of all creation  
in childbirth pain  
although for love.

New is the dawn each day  
and new the dusk.  
Between them is Life,  
not measured in hours,  
but in tempiternity,  
in eternal newness.

To the Father, mysterious Source,  
my prayer is sent;  
prayer that the Spirit  
in his constant flow

in the Son ever born  
continues outpouring.

My prayer is voiceless,  
but made of words.  
I said Father not Mother,  
Son too, not daughter  
to follow tradition;  
but they are only voices  
all without distinction.

I also said "prayer"  
to stay with the custom,  
since from the mouth it comes,  
but begins from the heart.  
Nor yet from there,  
for it knows not what to say.

A spectator I am  
of this divine flow  
whose name is Love.  
Lost in him I feel  
and desire not to meet him  
for nothing I seek  
since Life is life.

Then shall it not be prayer  
that wakens living,  
to the breath of Life  
wherever it beats?  
And living transform it  
to beauty and good.

If it would only love  
is not prayer innocence.

Aum—Amen—Alleluia.

## Part Two

### THE SUPREME EXPERIENCE *The Ways of East and West*

*na saṃsārasaya nirvāṇa kiṃcid  
asti viśeṣaṇam  
na nirvāṇasya saṃsārāt kiṃcid  
asti viśeṣaṇam*

There is no difference whatever  
between temporality and eternity.  
There is no difference whatever  
between eternity and temporality.

—Nāgārjuna, *Mādhyamika-kārikā* XXV.19<sup>1</sup>

In order to present with a degree of order the core, and obviously just the core, of the question, we shall consider first the meaning of *experience*; second, what *supreme* can possibly mean in this case; and third, some of the different ways of expressing this. As a personal preference I would put the problem by simply saying, the *myth*, the *logos*, and the *spirit*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Saṃsāra* is *nirvāṇa* and *nirvāṇa* *saṃsāra* because there can be no place for any difference, which would be the prerogative of either the one or the other. Cf. the meditation on Being and beings and on the famous *relatio rationis* of the Vedāntic and Christian Scholastics. Similarly, *saṃsāra* is *nirvāṇa* from a nirvāṇic point of view, and *nirvāṇa* is *saṃsāra* from a saṃsāric point of view. The translation of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* as temporality and eternity is only valid in their respective contexts.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. R. Panikkar, *La porta stretta della conoscenza. Sensi, ragione e fede* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2005), and *Il dharma dell'induismo. Una spiritualità che parla al cuore dell'Occidente* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2006), where many of the issues dealt with in this part are further explained.



## THE PROBLEM OF EXPERIENCE

### Prolegomena

The question about the nature and value of experience arises as soon as we begin to think about our experience. Yet then we no are longer experiencing, but thinking. Or more generally expressed, the awareness *of* an experience is not the experience. Furthermore, an experience cannot be experienced again: it would be another experience. Experiencing, like thinking, does not allow for self-reflection. This is both its strength and its weakness. By experience we mean the awareness of any direct contact with reality. The perfect experience would mean there was no difference or distinction of kind between the experiencing subject and the experienced object.

To place experience in the context of human life, without wanting to state a fully fledged anthropological theory, we may assume that Man has three organs or groups of organs, relating him with reality. *Sensory* consciousness relates us by means of our sense organs to what we could call the material part of reality. *Intellectual* knowledge opens us up to the intelligible world, to that web of relations that supports the intellectual world and that we cannot equate with mere matter. *Mystical* consciousness puts us in contact with what is invisible to the senses and the intellect. Whatever name we may use to describe them, and no matter what interpretation we may give to the "reality" revealed in each case, there seems little doubt about the existence of these three levels of consciousness. Furthermore, it would not seem unreasonable to state that these three orders of consciousness are not essentially independent windows but three dimensions, three different forms—sensory, intellectual, and mystical—of one and the same primordial consciousness.

The senses are not only "knowing" instruments—tools for action—they are also part of the very reality they disclose. Neither is the intellect only a knowing mind; it is also an acting will. The intellectual web of reality is not just an individual's private property but a commonality in which men participate. Mystical consciousness is not only a source of knowledge but an aspect of reality itself, which discloses itself when it strikes, as it were, a particular subject. This threefold human consciousness corresponds to the triadic nature of reality itself.

What we have said so far should not be interpreted solely in a realistic sense. It is equally valid and meaningful in other epistemologies and in more than one metaphysical system. We are not defining here what reality is or whether these

human experiences are "objectively" true or not. We only offer an overall outline that can be interpreted in many different ways. What we do emphasize, however, is the unitary character of this threefold consciousness—that is, the fact that any conscious human act has, to a greater or lesser degree, these three dimensions. When we define a human act as sensory activity or intellectual action or mystical awareness, we are actually simplifying; we are considering just one aspect of a more complex and unitary fact, which includes the sensual, intellectual, and mystical elements all in one. Abstraction is required, but we must not forget that we have been abstracting.

We could thus call consciousness that bridge, following the *Upaniṣadic* metaphor (or that light, following the biblical one), that connects the two shores of reality or the two poles of the real: the subject and the object, the inside and the outside. The link established by the bridge (or made possible by the light), namely consciousness, is of three kinds: the sensory, the intellectual, and the mystical—or as I call them elsewhere, the cosmic, the human, and the divine. In fact, these three dimensions of consciousness are also the three dimensions of reality; the first dimension is the condition for acting, the second allows understanding, and the third being.<sup>1</sup> So much for consciousness.

Now if the notion of consciousness may be used to stress the overall character of this process and its supra-individual aspect, the notion of experience represents the distinctive feature of the individual having or sharing in that consciousness. If consciousness is something in which we share, experience is something peculiar to each of us. We could almost say that, by definition, experience is the particular way one shares in a given state of consciousness. With these clarifications we may proceed to describe what can be understood by supreme experience.

### The Empirical, Experiment, and Experience

The entire history of human civilization could be imagined as the playing of a single (musical) theme in three variations (the empirical, experiment, and experience). The theme is personal realization, or playing on the common etymology of the variations themselves, the "attempt" to integrate ourselves into reality by taking the "risk" of "undergoing" the "trial" of "passing through" whatever process is required.<sup>2</sup> It is obvious that this expertise, which is gained only in the "crossing" of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. R. Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 1–77.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek *perai* and *peiran*, both at the base of our three words, come from the root *per* (in Sanskrit *par-* [cf. *pi-parmi*]) meaning to conduct, to pass through, to test, trial, attempt (thus, risk, danger). Cf. the Latin *porta*, *peritus*, *periculum*, *pirata*; the German *fahren* (from which *erfahren*); the English peril, fare, ferry; the French *perilleux*, etc. The empirical is proven reality, because it has passed through our senses; experiment is the same reality submitted to our testing (and trying) capacities; experience is the same reality that has already passed through.



temporal reality, cannot be measured in chronological periods, either individually or collectively. We call these *kairological* moments.<sup>3</sup>

There is a first period in the history of humanity (one is tempted to say there is equally a first period in the development of human consciousness) in which data are uncritically assumed and taken as bare facts. What is given, especially what is given to our senses, is taken as real. The empirical here does not only mean sensory knowledge. The philosophically uncritical mind also takes for granted what appears to it as given. And spiritual vision is equally unreflective: it corresponds to ecstatic vision, the overwhelming presence of the object in which the subject is utterly forgotten. It is the awareness of presence without the slightest shadow of self-awareness. In religion, philosophy, and art we could locate this period by recalling the beginnings of almost any culture. This primacy of data is still visible today in the natural sciences. The natural sciences, indeed, are still almost in ecstasy under the spell of data, which in this case are referred to as scientific facts.

The second moment is represented by the predominance of experiment. A certain doubt about the value of objectivity has crept in; Man has become more self-aware and realizes that the subject cannot remain uninvolved and without influence. The doubt has to be checked by abandoning the passive attitude of the contemplative and adopting a more active and aggressive approach: experiment, trial, test, intervention in the object itself. This is the period of critical awareness, and it reverberates on all three levels of consciousness. The experimental sciences make their appearance. In order to know what a thing is, mere observation is not enough. The experiment is not limited to the object alone; it is also performed on the subject itself. Man begins to analyze the human mind and the whole spiritual organism. Corresponding to physical experiments in the natural world, there are the internal experiments of critical philosophy and the psychological introspection of the mystics. The European Renaissance offers a typical example: a flourishing of experimentation on all levels of consciousness. Not only are human and celestial bodies examined, but the human mind and spirit are also subjected to the scrutiny of experimentation. One and the same wind blows through Leonardo da Vinci, Luther, Servetus, Galileo, and Descartes, to mention only a few names from very different fields.

The third moment is the result of this continuing process. Man has lost confidence in empirical data; he wants criteria of truth and verification and is ready to accept only what he can see for himself. But experiment still relies too much on the methods of the experimenter and still depends to an extent on the skill, awareness, and judgment of others; it needs a foundation. At this point, though, Man is not satisfied with anything unless he experiences it himself. Only personal experience cannot err; only if he has the experience himself will he be convinced of how things are. The empirical is pure objectivity; experiment blends the object with subjectivity, and experience abolishes any kind of objectivity that is not assumed and integrated

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<sup>3</sup> By *kairological* I mean the qualitative category of time that confers, at specific moments, a density or special importance (a time that is favorable, opportune, suitable, etc.).

into subjectivity. Anyone today seeking an experience of whatever kind—biological, psychological, scientific, or religious—is saying he simply does not trust pure objectivity or how others see, judge, or perceive things. He has to be personally involved; he has to undergo the experience. And one cannot have an experience by proxy.

### Myth

Experience not only implies a personal and nontransferable contact with the experienced object but also excludes any intermediary or third party, which would render the experience impossible by turning it into an experiment by virtue of its intervention. This implies, further, that every authentic experience excludes any consciousness of distance between the object and the subject, so that the object is no longer seen as such, but is totally united with or immersed in the subject.

There is an obvious difference between knowing about suffering, God, or love, and experiencing suffering, God, or love. My ideas about any object can be corrected, checked, changed, and indeed abandoned as inaccurate or wrong. A distance between the subject and the object allows modification of the object without compromising the subject. But this is not so with experience, as long as it is my experience. When I experience pain there is no possible doubt that I am in pain, even if I am convinced that there is no organic or external or intellectual reason for it. I can doubt whether to make this or that choice if I am guided by a certain lack of experience. I may have to ponder and decide according to common sense, instinct, reason, or the like, as long as I do not have an experience that renders any further doubt or hesitation impossible. When pure experience occurs, it is incontrovertible.

What we must underline here is not the analysis of the experience but its mythical character, which amounts to recognizing its primordial irreducibility. Any experience—sensory, intellectual, or spiritual—in fact functions as a myth. To begin with, it performs the same role and presents the same structure. Myth, like experience, enables us to stop for a while, to pause in our quest for the foundation of everything. Otherwise there would be a *regressus ad infinitum*. You cannot go beyond a myth, just as you cannot go beyond experience. If you could, you would lose both the myth and the experience. Neither allows for further explanation: the moment you explain a myth it ceases to be a myth, just as explaining an experience is no longer the experience. Neither allows for whys and wherefores: we are dealing with definitives. Any demythologization destroys the myth, just as any explanation destroys the experience as such. Both myth and experience are taken for granted when they are actually taken as myth and experience. They need no explanation. If you feel the need for some kind of justification, they have ceased to be what they were. Neither mythical consciousness nor experiential consciousness allows room for critical self-awareness, because it is at the opposite pole. If metaphysics requires self-awareness and philosophy is critical knowledge, then myth and experience are neither metaphysics nor philosophy. But perhaps the latter rely and are based on the former.

Both myth and experience present the same structure. In myth as in experience, there is no distance between the subject and the object. You are in the myth as you are in the experience; you live in them, or rather, you live them. You believe in the myth as you believe in the experience, without being aware that you do. Similarly, both present a kind of recessive structure; they do not disappear altogether when threatened or endangered. When visited by the *logos* probing their validity or justification, they simply regress; they recede to a deeper level, in another region still untouched by the invading light of critical reason or the rational mind. The relations between science and religion continually provide examples of this confusion in the realm of mystery and the hitherto unexplained.

Our main concern, however, is not to outline their similarities but to point out that experience is a very specific form of myth. What we would like to do now is to recount the myth of experience—that is, the history of human beings believing they have direct contact with reality, that they can participate not only in the ontic celebration of beings but also in the supreme cult of Being, that they have an immediacy that guarantees a direct contact with the real, so that once they have reached the experiential level they can stop and rest. The myth of experience is another, more subtle form of the myth of heaven and the celestial Paradise. It is a sublimated form of the myth of ultimate reality.

It should be emphasized here that myths cannot be surpassed. When we surpass one myth, another steps into its place, though perhaps on a deeper level. The process of demythologization so popular today is really the dynamic of *transmythicization*, a kind of mythical metamorphosis where obsolete and anachronistic myths yield to more modern and up-to-date myths.<sup>4</sup> Obviously these new myths, like the old myths for those who believed in them, are not seen as myths by the new believers.

We may summarize this first part by saying that every experience should be considered definitive, because experience means immediate contact with the real, and therefore there is no possibility of going beyond it without destroying the experience itself.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. R. Panikkar, "La demitologizzazione nell'incontro tra Cristianesimo e Hindùismo," in *Il problema della demitizzazione*, ed. E. Castelli (Rome: Istituto di studi filosofici, 1961).



## THE QUEST FOR THE SUPREME EXPERIENCE

Human history, both collective and personal, demonstrates that what was once considered definitive or immediate is later discovered to be mediated and thus neither definitive nor ultimate. Innocence is lost the moment one feels deceived. What, then, is the value of experience when you can no longer believe that the experience is going to be the last one, final and ultimate? In other words, what happens to experience once it is demythologized? The process is worth analyzing. No genuine experience can have extrinsic criteria of validity or authenticity. An experience is self-validating or it is not an experience at all.

How then can an experience be the foundation of everything? What happens if I do not share your experience? Or again, what is the value of the experiences of humanity that, as history shows, have triggered movements of all sorts—religious, philosophical, social, and political? What about the experiences of Buddha, Jesus, or Muhammad? What is the value of our experiences when they are gone or have changed? How can we rely on experiences?

We cannot answer all these questions here, but keeping them in mind, we will concentrate on our concrete issue: the value of the supreme experience.

Now we have two logical possibilities. Either we say that the ultimate experience is the same for all, even when we see it changing, or we appeal to the historical dimension of Man. In the first case, the change is said to reside in the interpretation of the experience, not in the experience itself. In the second case, we must give up any possible objective criterion. In other words, either we say that the experience is atemporal, though our interpretation depends on the cultural level, the historical moment, and so forth, or we affirm that the experience is intrinsically temporal, which amounts to saying that Man, and in the final analysis reality itself, is essentially temporal.

The first hypothesis, affirming that the experience remains the same, has the obvious problem of stating a fact for which there is no direct evidence whatsoever; it is an *a priori* statement derived from a certain worldview. The second hypothesis, stating that everything is inserted in a temporal flux, has the drawback of seeming to fall into total anarchy, for there seems to be no guarantee of coherence and continuity in human experience along the temporal line. There is no reason why what is experienced today as positive, valid, and immediately evident will not appear tomorrow as completely untenable.

Is there any way out of the dilemma? Must we choose either the timeless rigidity of everlasting values or the chaotic revolution of complete relativism? The quest for the supreme experience seems to be relevant here; it could serve as an example of how seemingly abstract and theoretical speculation can have practical and concrete relevance. But now we shall return to our philosophical analysis of human experience.

### Experience—Its Expression and Interpretation

We should not assume too hastily that an experience is totally independent of its expression, or that its interpretation is irrelevant to the experience itself. This could be the case, but it is by no means proven.

One of the most common observations on this sort of problem is to repeat time and again that the authentic experience is ineffable and that those who know do not speak and those who speak do not know. It may be that no words can communicate what it is, but then not all communication is necessarily verbal. To affirm that a certain reality is unthinkable is the same as implicitly recognizing that thought does not exhaust the realm of being. To assert that the supreme experience leaves all beings behind means admitting that beings are a relative reality and that the spatial metaphor of the "beyond" points toward something real, if indeed the word "real" can still be used in this context.

Moreover, we have to become aware of what is implied by the dichotomy between the experience and its expression. We understand by "expression" the manifestation of the experience—its first emanation *ad extra*, its first result, as it were—so that the act of the experience cannot be said to be a solipsistic act with no repercussion or irradiation outside itself. Finally, we must also distinguish the expression from its interpretation, this latter being the intellectual explanation of the experience as it is understood by our intellect.

If we accept the three levels of consciousness mentioned earlier, we can see an interesting correlation with these three facets of experience. On the one hand, there is a correlation between interpretation and intellectual consciousness. The expression or manifestation of the experience would correspond to sensory consciousness. By this pairing, we may understand not only the conventional sense organs but our whole body complex, so that the manifestation of the experience does not necessarily consist of a word or even a sound, but may be a more primordial expression of the whole body, of our terrestrial and temporal life. The experience itself would correspond to what we called "mystical consciousness." If this is the case, then we have also resolved the problem of the so-called ineffability of real experience. Experience would be inexpressible in terms of our sensory and intellectual consciousness but would correspond to mystical consciousness, which clearly does not translate itself into another form or take any other name, being itself the act that gives name and form to everything.

Be that as it may, we should only make distinctions as long as they do not break or disrupt the supreme unity of reality. We should not lose sight of the underlying

unity of the three stages of consciousness and the three modes of realization: experience, its manifestation, and its interpretation. At this point we need to introduce the only element that seems able to bear the full burden of the three worlds: the symbol.

By way of summary, we can state that the symbol stands for the whole of reality as it appears and manifests itself through its manifold structure. A symbol is precisely the thing, not the "thing in itself," which is a mental abstraction, but the thing as it appears, as it expresses and manifests itself. The symbol of a thing is neither another thing nor the thing in itself but the actual thing as it manifests itself, as it is in the world of beings, in the epiphany of the "is." Contemporary philosophy speaks of the ontological or transcendental difference (between beings and their entity—their concept), and the theological or transcendent difference (between God and beings), including even the so-called ontological or transcendentable difference (between beings with their entity and Being). We could, analogously, introduce here the *symbolic difference* as the *sui generis* difference between the symbol and its reality. The symbol is not another reality; it is not another thing, or the thing as we may imagine it in some nonexistent ideal realm. It is the thing as it really appears, as it really "is" in the realm of beings. The symbol is nothing but the symbol of the thing (subjective genitive), the particular mode of being of the very thing that, outside its symbolic form, *is* not and cannot *be*, because ultimately being is nothing but symbol. To be able to discover the symbolic difference—that is, to discover me as symbol of myself or, in other words, to understand that my being is one of the real symbols of the I (certainly not of my little ego)—could perhaps be considered one of the ways of reaching the supreme experience.

The symbolic difference, which overcomes the epistemic dichotomy between subject and object and the metaphysical one between thing and appearance, leads us to consider the relationship between the three levels of consciousness: experience, its expression, and its interpretation. The mystic runs the risk of clinging to experience while neglecting the other two elements; the philosopher is tempted to identify interpretation with the actual "thing," and the man of action risks falling into the trap of mistaking expression or manifestation for the whole of reality. Only a balanced and harmonic interplay of the three levels can help us gain an integral awareness of the real. The symbolic represents precisely this attitude that does not reduce reality to just one of its many sides. It chooses neither the subject nor the object, but mediates through symbol. But we cannot here pursue this tangent any further, important as it is; instead we take up once again the main thread of our story.

### The Loss of the Subject

Let me ask a simple question: When do I begin to doubt the validity of my experience? If our description of experience is correct, there can only be one answer: I doubt the validity of my experience only when I cease to have that experience. As long as I am having an experience I cannot doubt it. I begin to doubt when I begin to wonder what this experience means. This occurs first of all when I recognize the

experience as such. When experience becomes aware of itself as experience, it ceases to be pure experience and becomes the reflexive consciousness of that experience. The experience of prayer, like the experience of pain or that of love, is incompatible with my awareness that I am having that experience. In other words, when the *logos* enters into the experience, triggering the self-awareness that is typical of the intellect, then the experience is no longer pure experience. Pure light dazzles, pure pain is numbing, pure prayer is mute, pure attention is uncontrolled, pure ecstasy is unconscious.

Let us imagine we are having an aesthetic experience contemplating the beauty of a landscape. The moment I become aware that I am having such an experience, or that it is through my eyes that I am seeing and having the experience, the real experience is lost to me. I have become aware of an intermediary that I did not consider before. Or, rather, there was no intermediary until I became conscious of one. The intermediary peephole through which I see at the same time separates what it unites. To put it simply, no critical awareness is capable of being an experience because it is typical of criticism to be conscious of itself.

We could go further and deeper with this analysis, but the point is already clear. The main question now is familiar to most cultures and religions: Is there any possible experience that excludes this destructive self-awareness? Could there be an experience in which the self that experiences is the same as the experience itself? We have already seen that in any real experience the object is lost because its distance from the subject is reduced to zero. The supreme experience would then be that experience in which the subject is also lost. We should not at this stage commit the methodological mistake of trying to describe such an experience by relying on a particular interpretation of its contents, say, in a theistic worldview. We have to stay in purely formalistic territory. Nevertheless, we might describe it by resorting to a particular tradition to provide the necessary specific terminology, but without implying any adherence to that particular path.

If I see the landscape, or smell the flower, or think the thought, or will the action, or understand the situation, I may have an experience of these objects when they merge into me so that there is no longer any distinction. But there is always the possibility to "turn back," as a certain mysticism would say. This is so because although in the experience the object is lost in the subject, the latter is not lost, nor is the identification total in either direction (the object is not totally subsumed in the subject, and vice versa). How can I see (understand, discover) that seeing (understanding, discovering) by which all the rest becomes seen (understood, discovered)?

With what can one know the knower? The difficulty is clear: You cannot see the seer of seeing; you cannot think the thinker of thinking. How could you know the knower?<sup>1</sup> The knower you might eventually know would by this very fact no longer be the knower but what is "known" by you. In truth, there is one way the question can be answered: not by knowing the knower or understanding the understander,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. BU II.4.14; III.4.2; IV.5.15; etc.



but by being oneself the knower and understander. This is the only way in which the experience does not cancel itself—not merely by reaching identification with the object experienced but by becoming the experience itself, the knower, the understander.

In this sense, the supreme experience is neither supreme nor experience. It is not supreme because it is not superior or the first among many. It is not experience either, because there is no subject experiencing an object.

### The Supreme Experience

If what we have said so far makes any sense, the supreme experience will be synonymous with pure consciousness, and pure consciousness will stand for the core of reality inasmuch as only consciousness makes room for the plurality of sensory experience, the multiplicity of the intellectual experience, and the ambiguity of the mystical experience. Consciousness, and consciousness alone, allows the many and the one to blend harmoniously: the existence of different states of consciousness and the fact of being conscious of the multiplicity do not make consciousness manifold; on the contrary, they reinforce its primordial oneness.

The supreme experience, then, would be that experience that is so identified with the reality itself that it is nothing but that reality. It is not the highest among the experiences; it does not experience anything. It recovers lost innocence in a way that is not even comparable to the original. The original innocence had no knowledge of good and evil, nor any experience of the manifold in its excruciating diversity, division, and tension. It was a kind of blessed ignorance, what we still call innocence today. The recovery of innocence is, properly speaking, not a recovery but a creation, a re-creation, a new state that is not "brand new" because it is not a substitute for a former decrepitude. It is simple reality.

The supreme experience is not an experience either, not in the sense that we use, in any other case. Not only is the object lost, but the subject, too, is no longer there as a substrate or basis for the experience. No one can *have* pure consciousness. It would no longer be pure if it had a foundation in any subject. Neither can it be self-conscious, if we understand by this any type of reflexive self-consciousness. We could rather call it non-self-consciousness precisely because it is mere consciousness: an awareness that is not aware that it is aware, an infinite ignorance.

One way of describing the supreme experience with the minimum of philosophical assumptions could perhaps take the following form.

Let us begin with any experience—for instance, the simplest of all: I am touching an object. I have the branch of a tree in my hand, I am pressing and caressing it, I may like to bite it and to smell and taste it eventually. My thinking is absent for the moment and my spiritual awareness as well. I am lost in contact with a piece of nature. This is a sensual experience, but it does not last forever. Perhaps an impertinent fly disturbs my "distraction," or a fleeting thought crosses my mind or my body reminds me of the hour. I still want to remain in communion with that branch, but I have discovered, first, that neither the object nor the subject was pure, complete,

or exhaustive. The branch is not the whole tree and far less the whole of nature; my hands and all my senses are not the whole of my being and far less the whole of all other possible subjects. I would like to cling to my branch. I may begin to meditate on it, to concentrate not only my senses but also my mind and even my will on the branch. If I succeed, I may reach another type of experience in which the identification is at once much deeper and much wider. For a moment I may be identified with the branch, and if I am lost deeply enough in the branch, my identification might not stop at the branch, but might go on to include a large part of nature, and eventually the whole of vegetable life. For a moment there may be identification between me and all nature. I am not touching a branch but embracing the entire natural world.

But my experience need not stop here. It may develop in both directions, losing the object until it reaches totality and losing the subject until it in turn reaches the other pole, so to speak, of totality. Perhaps with the branch this may be somewhat difficult, but it is certainly not impossible. I may leave the woods and throw the branch away. But equally I may go back to the branch, although it is no longer just a branch but the whole tree, the entire wood, and the universe in its totality, something I cannot touch with my hands or feel with my sentiments, but a concrete mirror and a reflection of the whole that I can somehow enter with all my being. I may lose myself in such an experience, and perhaps more than one expert will tell me I have had an experience of natural mysticism. But that is not all. One might assume that I believe in a personal God. This would allow for another type of experience, which some may call the vision of God. For a general description, however, I need not assume that I am a theist or an atheist. I am convinced that the experience would be the same, even though the interpretations differ.

Now the contact with the branch may be so intense and profound that I find myself in contact not with a bundle of electrons configured as a branch, but with that primordial matter common to all material things. Entering into immediate contact with this primordial matter I am also in immediate contact with the very ground of being that gives consistency and existence to that primeval matter. Some may call it God; some may not. In any case I am in direct contact with the ultimate reality of that branch, which has to do, in the end, with the same reality that underlies everything. We may differ in our use of the word "reality," and we may disagree inasmuch as I may think the crucial reality is the distinctive and not the uniting factor. But there is an experience here that as such—without any claim to metaphysical interpretations—reaches the very boundaries of reality.

This, however, is not yet the supreme experience because it still has to become the total universalization of the subject having that experience. Until now I have been *dragged away*, as it were; I have been lost in the object or the object has been lost in me. But I have not yet been *transported above* myself so that there is no longer a "me." To concentrate on the branch (disregarding for now other possible requirements according to various schools of thought) and totally lose myself in the entire universe, I also need the action of the ultimate reality of that branch upon me. I need the opposite thrust in order to totally lose myself, my ego, and understand that the

subject of the experience is no longer my senses or my mind or my mystical awareness, but something that stands over me and overcomes me and about which I can only speak on later. It is something that does not leave any room for saying that the experience is in any way mine. In theistic terms I no longer "see" the branch or the universe, but "create" it, call it into existence, because it is no longer my ego doing this but the divine *I* in which my person is immersed and with which my person is united, however we may prefer to describe this process. This would be the beginning, the threshold of the supreme experience. Explanations and interpretations can come later. We might still add one more thing: the manifestation of this experience can be detected; it totally transforms my life. The manifestation will not consist of my words or an account of my experience. Its real expression will be incarnated in my life; it will crystallize in my existence and be visible to anyone who may care to look and whose eye is sensitive to what is there to be seen.

We have called this the threshold of the supreme experience. In other words, it has been the supreme experience for the present moment. Someone who has had such an experience will "come back" to what mortals call ordinary life. But once it has taken hold of a man, the supreme experience transforms him totally; he cannot be the same as before. It is a death and a resurrection. That person will perform the ordinary acts of human life like any other mortal, but he will not feel distracted by his ordinary life because there is no incompatibility of domains. The supreme experience is not psychological. Nevertheless it makes sense to distinguish here, as in most mystical schools, two different levels: the supreme experience compatible with mortal life in the visible structures of space and time, and that other supreme experience in which time and space have been completely integrated into the experience itself. We cannot say much more (we have perhaps already said too much) about the supreme experience before proceeding to a certain typology of its manifestations.

If I were to describe the supreme experience in my own personal, *advaitic*, and Trinitarian words, I would say nothing. Still, if pressed to do so, I would say something like this: It is the experience of the *you*, the realization of myself as *you*: *tat tvam asi*, or again, *filius meus es tu*, or *ecce ego quia vocasti me*, or ἔσθαι σὺ—*esthesy*, you are (to use the language of four traditions and to which one could add the experience underlying the *nairātmayavāda*).<sup>2</sup>

It means understanding (myself as) all reality but capsized as it were, upside down, like the cosmic tree of the *Upaniṣads*, or the *metanoia* (conversion, changing of *nous*, of mind) of the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> It means discovering me, image of all reality, at the meeting place of the real, at the crossroads of Being, at the very center. But the center would be unreal if there were not the sphere (or something else) of which it is

<sup>2</sup> Systems that deny *ātman*.

<sup>3</sup> This could be a cosmotheandric interpretation of the Eucharist. Cf. R. Panikkar, "Colligate Fragmenta: For an Integration of Reality," in *From Alienation to At-Oneness: Proceedings of the Theology Institute of Villanova University*, ed. F. A. Eigo (Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 1977).

the center. The image would be mere hallucination if the original were not real. The crossroads is where beings cross. And yet the one would not be without the other.

The supreme experience is pure consciousness, but this is not self-consciousness in the sense of experience of the self. Pure consciousness is consciousness of the *you*, and it is in this you-consciousness that we all meet, including the *I* that can only be experienced in and through the you. There is no I-consciousness. There is only consciousness, and this is precisely the you: the very consciousness *of* the I (subjective genitive). The *I* neither has nor is consciousness, it is the source of it—if this is not stretching the metaphor too far.

We could also venture a purely philosophical formulation of the supreme experience (for lack of a better word) and affirm that the true and complete principle of identity, the metaphysical one and not the merely logical, does not take the form of "I am I" (which amounts to a barren tautology imprisoning the I in inevitable solipsism), but the form of "I am you." "Who are you?" says an extraordinary verse of one *Upaniṣad*, speaking about supreme liberation. "I am you," says the answer and the text continues, "then He releases him."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *KausU*1.2.

## THE WAYS OF EAST AND WEST

### Eastern and Western Values

East and West have been separated for so long, living in reciprocal misunderstanding and worlds apart, that a certain inertia in our ways of looking at things may obscure the fact that East and West are no longer what was traditionally described by these two almost magical names. To begin with, East and West cannot be considered purely or mainly geographical features. And this is not only because we discovered long ago that the earth is round and that "East" and "West" are relative to one's perspective, but because today even these differences are minimal and can be found in any reasonably sized nation-state. Nor can East and West be called *historical* concepts. The history of the peoples of the world is no longer a patchwork of isolated fragments. The destiny of the West may well be settled by battles taking place in the East, while the future of the East may well depend on the policies of the West. Western and Eastern histories are no longer closed systems. For the first time human history is also the history of mankind, not that by saying this we fall into the myth of globalization.

*Cultural* distinctions also fade away or merely reveal oversimplifications and gaps that are not yet totally overcome. Not only can the typically Western spirit be found outside the West, but the traditional Eastern way of looking at things is also gaining ground in Western latitudes. In reality, there is not a single cultural difference that could be called specifically Eastern or Western—certainly not logic or mysticism, or for that matter technology, science, or metaphysics. Even *philosophical* idiosyncrasies cannot be divided into exclusively Eastern or Western ways of thinking or philosophizing. Both the East and the West are too vast and variegated to allow the overstating of special features in their philosophical vision of life. The times when a certain feature could be called peculiarly Eastern or Western are long gone.

Again, *religious* divisions can no longer be credited to East and West. In spite of the continuing burden of the past, it is rare for a religion today to fit into an East-West dichotomy. Most world religions were born in one place and flourished in another. To identify a religion with one particular continent seems almost fatuous today. It is hard to say whether Christianity is more Jewish than Greek or Roman, whether Buddhism is more Indian than Chinese, whether Judaism is more Palestinian than Babylonian, Eastern European, Spanish, or whatever.

It is then meaningless to speak of the ways of the East and those of the West? I think not. They still retain a deep significance, perhaps the deepest of all: only if East and West are understood as *anthropological* categories will they find their place, justification, and value in today's world.

In every human being there is an East and a West, just as every human being is in a certain sense androgynous, but normally one of the two aspects of the human predominates. With the world on the way to becoming geographically one, it would be unacceptable if its people were still to remain isolated, unconcerned, or confused by the symbiosis that is the only hope for many world problems today. But this cross-fertilization is possible because the human being already has within himself the seeds of both values. In each of us there is a West and an East. Every human person has an Orient, a horizon he never reaches, always beyond and behind, where the sun rises, a dimension of hope, a vague of sense of transcendence, a morning knowledge (*cognitio matutina*). Similarly, every human being has an Occidental dimension, of maturity, where the sun sets, where material and concrete values are valued, where faith is felt as a necessity, where the shapes and forms become important and the evening knowledge (*cognitio vespertina*), which discovers the immanence in things themselves, is most prized.

We could go on indefinitely, but this may suffice for our problem. The thrust of what we are saying is this: Any interreligious and interhuman dialogue, any exchange between cultures, has to be preceded by an intrareligious and intrahuman dialogue, an internal conversion within the person. The gulf between so many abysses—between East and West in this case—can be bridged only if we realize the synthesis and the harmony in the microcosm of ourselves. We are the chasm, and at the same time we are the bridge to cross it.

### Four Archetypes of Ultimate Reality

We cannot go on forever avoiding the problem of content and overlooking the different ways in which the supreme experience has been described by different schools and traditions. But equally we must be aware of the limitations of any particular description. Here an analysis from the perspective of the history of religions should prove fruitful and enlightening. Only very tentatively do I submit the following typology, based not so much on the textbook divisions between religions and cultures as along the lines of what we have just been saying about East and West as anthropological categories. If examples are drawn from the great religious traditions of mankind, this should not contradict what we have been saying, but simply bear witness to the fact that certain emphases are easier to find among some peoples than others.

I repeat once and for all that I do not intend to describe any religious spirituality in particular or to deny that there may be other trends of thought within a given religion; nor do I claim that this typology is a typology of religions. I speak of four

archetypes of the human being, although they may be more visible in one place or time than in another. Moreover, it is a distinctive feature of our times that we begin to find all these four archetypes within a single religion.

It seems that the human spirit, in its effort to understand and express the supreme experience, has emphasized either its transcendence or its immanence.

Within the first group we find two definite tendencies: the tendency to stress transcendence and the tendency to stress immanence. The former is typical of the Semitic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The latter could be said to form the Hindū type and is represented by the bundle of religious traditions that circulate under the name of Hindūism.

The group more inclined to emphasize immanence could equally be subdivided: one underscoring the transcendent character of the immanence, and we think here of Buddhism, and the other accenting the immanent aspect of this immanence, and here we would see the Chinese religious tradition and curiously enough the modern secular spirit as well.

The following scheme sums up very concisely what we are saying:

|                       |               |              |  |
|-----------------------|---------------|--------------|--|
| Supreme<br>Experience | Transcendence | Transcendent | <i>Yahweh—Theos—Allah—Father</i>                                   |
|                       |               |              | Father—Masculine—Holiness<br>Distinction                           |
|                       |               | Immanent     | <i>Brahman—Mother</i>  |
|                       |               |              | Mother—Feminine—Negation<br>Absorption                             |
|                       | Immanence     | Transcendent | Neuter— <i>nirvāṇa—śūnyatā</i>                                     |
|                       |               |              | Impersonal<br>Indifference   |
|                       |               | Immanent     | Apersonal—secular— <i>kami</i>                                     |
|                       |               |              | Acceptance of the human condition<br>Negation of any transcendence |

### *Transcendent Transcendence*

The attitude here is markedly masculine. Force, power, and glory are some of its attributes. Be it Yahweh, the Christian *Theos*, or Allah, this God is eminently Father and thus creator and evidently outside the world. He is transcendent in such an absolute way that he mainly creates, looks after, and judges the world, without mixing with the world, as it were. The supreme experience consists in seeing this dazzling light face to face. God is above all the holy one, and holiness here means separation, lofty segregation. God is utterly transcendent, and this very transcendence gives him the sovereign freedom to deal with men. The supreme experience in this case is not available to men. It is reserved for the transcendent God. We can at most be united with him through love or knowledge, depending on the theological trends of different schools. The supreme experience cannot in any way represent an escape from the human condition. It has to be concrete and personal, and must preserve our peculiarities. At the same time it has to free us from our limitations. It has to throw us into the arms of the Absolute, but the distinction between the two is scrupulously preserved. Of course, there is the mitigating effect of Christian incarnation, like the more mellow tones of the Kabbala, of Hasidic spirituality, and of Sufism (but we have already said that we are trying to describe anthropological archetypes rather than to set out a typology of religions).

### *Immanent Transcendence*

The attitude here is visibly feminine. Brahman is also transcendent, though not because it is distant, different, and above, but precisely because it is below and common, the mere condition for being, the basis of any existence without being itself any particular existence. Brahman is transcendent because of its own immanence—so immanent that it has, so to speak, no consistency of its own. It does not even know it is *brahman*. This would jeopardize its immanent transcendence, for it would then have the distance necessary for knowledge and could not be so radically immanent to the world. It is the *matrix*, the *yonī*, more like a mother nurturing from below than a command from above. It does not lead but sustains. The supreme experience would therefore consist in being immersed in *brahman*, not so much becoming *brahman*, which would postulate a certain activity extraneous to the utter passivity necessary for its immanent transcendence, as discovering the *brahman* that is in me or that I am. The supreme experience is not so much to stay within one's own human condition, sticking to a name and form that are only passing and provisional, but to experience totality, to be totality from a 360-degree angle, embracing all that is. This way is a negative path; it denies all individuality and all differences. One of the criteria for testing the authenticity of experience consists in checking whether the candidate has lost the fear of disappearing, of losing himself, or if he still clings to his little ego.



### *Transcendent Immanence*

Here the landscape changes radically. The attitude is no longer masculine or feminine but rather neuter (*ne-utrum*), neither male nor female and yet somehow personal, although in a markedly nonanthropomorphic sense. Immanence here is so radical that only by transcending everything built up on it can one reach ultimate reality. One has to reduce to ashes everything one can conceive of or think; every idea or image of being has to disappear so that pure nothingness (*śūnyatā*) may emerge—obviously not as some-thing and much less as something else but as the nonemergence of anything. *Nirvāṇa* is the supreme experience, the experience that is not actually “experienceable” at all, and that suddenly realizes that *saṃsāra* is *nirvāṇa*, that is, that there is no transcendence other than immanence, and thus that only by transcending the immanence itself can Man somehow fulfill his life.

The supreme experience here is obviously not the experience of an other, nor is it an experience different from any other human experience. It underlies all of them and can be reached only by quenching every desire to transcend the human condition. Yet precisely because this human condition is a negative experience, its negation—without wanting to transcend it—is the only way to salvation, to *nirvāṇa*. The supreme experience is reached neither by seeing God in all things (the first case) nor by seeing all things in God (the second case, albeit expressed in terms rather alien to this path), but by refusing to divinize anything that comes into the range of our experience. You are not having the supreme experience if you affirm or indeed doubt that you *are*. The supreme experience lies in the fact that there is no supreme experience. Realizing this awakens us to real liberation.

### *Immanent Immanence*

The attitude here is radically terrestrial. Immanence is not to be transcended. If the other three attitudes still recognize, in a personal or impersonal way, that the sphere of immanence has to be somehow corrected or transcended, this fourth attitude does not recognize any escape from the factual human condition. There is no way out. There is no other world than this, and it is no use sublimating our aspirations and desires or projecting our dreams outside the realm of reasonable verification. *Kami* in Japanese Shintoism means “God,” but also “above,” “up,” or anything for that matter superior to Man in any way, no matter how trivial. Traditional Chinese religiosity will not allow the introduction of another factor into the human situation in order to manage it. Religion is supreme indifference. The supreme experience is that of the sage who fully understands the fickleness and complexity of the human heart. The supreme experience consists in renunciation of all extrapolation and immersion into the real-world situation without transcending it, not even negatively. Modern secular spirituality, too, which pragmatically refuses to speculate about any experience outside the earthly sphere, could also be cited as an example of this attitude. It finds the universal and the immanent in the concrete—in the given, all that is needed.

## The Spirit

Is there a way to find a certain equivalence between such diverse views and opinions? Are we to conclude that mankind has no unanimity whatsoever? Is the unity of the human family only a biological trait or a utopian dream? Am I so right that the others must be wrong? Nations are at war with one another, religions consider themselves incompatible, philosophies contradict one another, and now in human experience itself—in the very attempt to overcome all the smallness of systems and ideologies—the divergences seem just as deep as in any other human reality. Was it not above all the desire to overcome differences of opinion and arguments over perception that motivated experience? If there is no other arbiter beyond our personal experience, must we give up all hope of peacefully understanding one another, and so prepare the way for new forms of imperialism and world domination (apparently the only other way to bring a certain coherence and harmony to mankind)? After two world wars and with several minor but no less horrible wars still ravaging mankind today, we cannot put much trust in pure reason and individual ideologies. Could it be that human experience—supreme or not—offers a better starting point?

These questions are far from rhetorical. They constitute a real challenge to any authentic theology and philosophy if these disciplines are to be anything more than barren and lifeless mental exercises designed to confuse whoever still has any sensitivity and vision. We cannot expect philosophy or theology to do everything, and we must beware of false messiahs, but one extreme does not justify the other.

Is it possible to understand and to some degree accept manifold human experience? Is it possible to integrate the various expressions of the supreme experience? If we can give a positive answer to such a tantalizing question, we may not have solved the problems of the world, but we will certainly have contributed in quite a positive and effective way to their solution. At least we will have removed one of the most subtle obstacles: the lack of mutual trust that comes from a lack of understanding. If we do not understand the other, we consider him wrong, or even in bad faith; we cannot trust him—and this is only one consequence. On the other hand, it would be a bad service, even a fatal blow, to philosophy and a betrayal of mankind if, driven by a well-intentioned desire for mutual understanding, we were to blur the issues and preach harmony and convergence when there is none.

To put it quite bluntly: If there is a God, and if this is considered to be the only possible basis for a fully human and meaningful life, then even if we respect the right of others or acknowledge their good faith, we shall not be able to consider them full citizens of the academic, cultural, religious or human world if they deny such a personal God. Or, the other way around: If we believe that there is no God and that the idea of God is still a throwback to an obscurantist age totally incompatible with an enlightened, nonsectarian, and nonfanatical existence, then all those who still cling to such superstitions are at the very least retrograde and the major obstacle to a better, more evolved world. We should not minimize or banalize the issue by

giving it an academic label. Any serious investigation of the supreme experience cannot avoid this challenge.

Briefly but clearly I would like to outline my own answer. First of all, as the previous analyses may have already suggested, the shift in emphasis from objective values to experiential truth can only be seen as a positive step toward a more mature conception of the whole and complex human situation. Orthodoxy cannot be the supreme value. Second, the distinction between agnostic or skeptical *relativism* and a realistic *relativity* seems important. The former is a dogmatic attitude that arises as a reaction to another monolithic dogmatism. The latter is the recognition that nothing is absolute in this relative world of ours, that everything depends on the intrinsic and constitutive relationship of everything to everything else; isolation and solipsism are simply by-products of a peculiarly human *hubris* (pride). The brotherhood of Man is not just an ethical imperative. Third, and this is what we should draw from the foregoing analyses, ultimate experience cannot be reduced to a single denominator. Certainly, the *logos* element in experience is important; it holds the veto (nothing contradicting reason can be accepted), but it is not man's most precious gift. Not only is it perfectly possible for things not to consist of words or concepts, but here on earth itself not everything is *logos*.

In today's world, humanity's real task is to integrate not only the exigencies of the *logos* but also the realities of myth and, last but not least, the freedom of the Spirit.



## PRAYER: TO WHOM?

I cry!

I weep!

Prayer comes only out of the depths—spontaneously.

Will Someone hear my prayer?

Or is it only a wind from the abyss to nothingness?

. . .

I cry for joy—and sing with praise  
because I love.

I weep in sorrow—and groan in pain,  
because I am not indifferent.

*Who* does it?

I do not believe it comes from me;

—not from my will;

and yet it is through me,

—perhaps from my heart.

But from where?

My heart is touched by the Outside.

*To whom* is it directed?

I do not know.

I cannot name it.

All names have become suspect.

And yet, I know I do not need to know.

. . .

No true prayer is self-conscious.

It could not resist turning back upon itself,  
it would explode in self-reflection.

Am I then no longer praying, when I want to pray?

Or am I only aware that some Spirit is praying in me?

For what, if it is a divine Spirit?

Who, if there is only one Self?

Then do only the ignorant pray?

Those who know who they are?

A solitary Self does not pray.  
 If you were me, would you still pray?  
*Who am I* then for you?  
 Not your creation.  
 You would not need to pray to your own creature.  
*Who are You* then for me?  
 Certainly not my creation.  
 Could it be that I am you and You the I?  
 You my true I, and I your true you?  
*Tat tvam asi* (You are that)  
 or is it all a monologue?  
 Yours or mine?  
 Or are we not two, without being one?  
 Should it be called *advaita*, or perhaps Trinity?

\* \* \*

For millennia people have prayed.  
 Since olden times paṇḍits "know better"  
 and weave fine theories.  
 They use many words,  
 and utter many names.  
 Sometimes they are generic terms.  
 They all mean Power:  
 Lord, *bhagavan*, creator, *pati* . . .  
 And I get afraid.  
 Sometimes they use proper names:  
*Viṣṇu*, *Yahweh*, *Allah* . . .  
 And I feel confused.  
 I too have my *iṣṭadevatā*,  
 but I dare not speak his name,  
 lest others, and I myself, hearing it, mistake it for the Absolute.  
 I say it when only he can forgive my passion, and my presumption.

\* \* \*

Could it be that prayer divides us?  
 Or that we fight, because You are not their You?  
 Can we pray together only in silence?  
 Is it forbidden to enjoy the symphony?  
 Or do we want our God to conduct the orchestra?  
 Do we know our God that well?  
 Is it then better not to pray?

I cannot believe there is war in heaven too.  
 Is there no peace in the *devaloka*?  
 I understand that we do not "pray to the same thing."  
 There is no such "thing."  
 Or is prayer only a psychic need?  
 To say that You have All-Names  
 is to affirm that you possess No-Name,  
 that You are anonymous,  
 that prayer can have no names,  
 no concepts or ideas.  
 My prayer stops—frustrated.  
 Or is this stopping, after so much talking, the real prayer?  
 Or have I been wrong from the beginning?  
*Et clamor meus ad Te veniat!*

\* \* \*

One prayer I can still recite  
 A prayer, directed mainly to those like me.  
 It is a groan of compassion,  
 and a cry of hope:  
 that there be peace and harmony  
 among the people who pray.  
 Is not prayer the revelation of our precariousness?  
 Of our contingency?  
 Our touching the Infinite, though in one single point?  
 Am I in Hindūism or Christianity?  
 Or am I rather Buddhist?  
 Why these labels in the field of prayer?  
 Yes, I can pray in many languages.  
 None of them says the same thing,  
 because faith has no object.  
 But they all speak, sing, suffer, rejoice. . . .  
 All these prayers are mine,  
 and my sisters' and brothers'.  
 Perhaps I can only pray with their prayers.  
 And for this I am immensely grateful.





## GLOSSARY

This glossary does not include those Sanskrit words whose meaning is explained in the context in which they appear.

*adhyāsa* (Sanskrit): "superimposition," false attribution of various attributes to reality.

*advaita* (Sanskrit): a-duality. A metaphysical expression of the irreducibility of the nature of reality to pure unity (monism) or to mere duality; a philosophical concept present in many religions, especially in the East.

*agape* (Greek): love.

*agorá* (Greek): public square where the citizens met and held assemblies in ancient Greek cities.

*ahimsā* (Sanskrit): "innocence," nonviolence, refraining from harming any living being.

*anirvacanīya* (Sanskrit): polarity between Being (*sat*) and Non-Being (*a-sat*), indescribable.

*anubhava* (Sanskrit): experience, direct vision.

*anupāya* (Sanskrit): not depending upon any intermediary.

*aparokṣa* (Sanskrit): immediate perceptibility.

*aparokṣānubhūti* (Sanskrit): immediate knowledge.

*apatheia* (Greek): impassibility, indifference, calm, imperturbability (complete freedom from all emotive reaction to the events of life).

*apauruṣeyatva* (Sanskrit): of nonhuman origin, without *puruṣa*.

*asparśayoga* (Sanskrit): yoga without intermediary, without mental content, arrest of the mind, nonmind.

*aspiration*: pure dynamism of the person, urge of the spirit toward something.

*ataraxia* (Greek): calm, imperturbability, tranquillity (imperturbability of the wise in the face of the passions and troubles of the world).

*avijñātaṃ* (Sanskrit): unknown.

*bhārata-nāṭyam* (Sanskrit): divine dance.

*bios* (Greek): existence, biological life, duration of life.

*bodhicitta* (Sanskrit): one who possesses perfect wisdom, enlightenment.

*bodhisattva* (Sanskrit): the enlightened one; one who, having achieved liberation on earth, is committed to helping all sentient beings to reach liberation themselves.

*brahmacarya* (Sanskrit): religious studentship, the first stage of the spiritual life.

*Christianness*: religiosity based on the experience of Christ.

*dabar* (Hebrew), *vāc* (Sanskrit), *logos* (Greek): word.

*desire*: attraction toward a good or an external object, even if only present in the mind.

*devaloka* (Sanskrit): the world of the Gods.

*Dhammapāda* (Sanskrit): sacred text of Buddhism.

*empeiria* (Greek): experience, practice, skill (experience—as a practical as opposed to theoretical activity—as the only valid source of knowledge).

*enstasis* (Greek): entering completely into oneself; through concentration and meditation we reach a state of absolute immedesimation (absorption) with the contemplated object, with the Self.

*epektasis* (*exstasis*) (Greek): coming out of oneself.

*eros* (Latin): love.

*ex-perire* (Latin), *perai* (Greek), *pi-piparmi* (Sanskrit): experience.

*guru* (Sanskrit): literally “heavy,” master, spiritual guide; usually refers to those who have achieved self-realization.

*hieros gamos* (Greek): holy nuptials; refers to a sacred union, a coupling (sometimes marriage) between two divinities or between a god and a Man or a woman, usually symbolic and often ritual.

*hypomonē* (Greek): patience, perseverance.

*iṣṭadevatā* (Sanskrit): concrete symbol of the divine, the divinity of a person or a group for cult and meditation.

*jñāna* (Sanskrit): experiential knowledge of reality. One of the paths of liberation.

*kenosis* (Greek): emptying, overcoming of the ego.

*learned ignorance*: classical term in spirituality used by Nicholas of Cusa to indicate supreme innocence, the ignorance of one’s own knowledge.

*mahāvākya* (Sanskrit): grand statement that expresses very concisely the content of the experience of the Absolute.

*manas* (Sanskrit): the mind in its widest sense, heart, intellect, internal organ, and seat of thought, understanding, and imagination.

*maṇḍala* (Sanskrit): literally “blind.” Mystical representation of all reality; a pictorial representation of the homology between the microcosm (man) and the macrocosm (the universe).

*mārga* (Sanskrit): path, way.

*metanoia* (Greek): overcoming of the *nous* (mind), transformation, change of mentality or heart, conversion.

- mikrokosmos* (Greek): all reality reflected or concentrated in the individual.
- mīmāṃsā* (Sanskrit): one of the classical systems of Indian philosophy, principally concerned with the fundamental rules for the interpretation of the Vedic texts.
- mokṣa* (Sanskrit): final liberation from the *saṃsāra*, from the cycle of birth and death, from *karman*, from ignorance; salvation.
- mumukṣutva* (Sanskrit): spiritual desire for salvation, for liberation.
- mythos* (Greek): the horizon of presentness that requires no further investigation.
- nairātmyavāda* (Sanskrit): radical unthinkableness of the origin.
- naiṣkarmya* (Sanskrit): abandonment of action or action free of gain.
- nāma-rūpa* (Sanskrit): name and form.
- nirvāṇa* (Sanskrit): liberation, final extinction, including time, space, and being.
- nirvikalpa* (Sanskrit): certain, beyond doubt.
- nitya-anitya-vastu-viveka* (Sanskrit): discernment between permanent (eternal) and temporal things.
- noēma* (Greek): the unit of intellectual perception.
- noēsis noēseōs* (Greek): "the thought of thought," characteristic of the pure act or Aristotelian prime mover.
- ontonomy*: intrinsic connection of an entity with the totality of Being, the constitutive order (*nomos*) of every being as Being (*ōn*), harmony that allows the *inter-in-dependence* of all things.
- pañḍit* (Sanskrit): erudite.
- perichoresis* (Greek): interpenetration of divine persons; a notion of the Trinitarian doctrine of the early church.
- pisteuma* (Greek): what the believer believes, the intentional sense of religious phenomena.
- pratiṣṭhā* (Sanskrit): foundation, support, base.
- pratītyasamutpāda* (Sanskrit): conditioned origin, radical relativity.
- pratyakṣa* (Sanskrit): direct perception.
- ṛta* (Sanskrit): cosmic and sacred order, sacrifice as universal law, truth, the ultimate, dynamic, and harmonious structure of reality.
- śaiva siddhānta* (Sanskrit): one of the branches of śaivism, an important Indian religion.
- samādhi* (Sanskrit): complete absorption in ultimate reality with loss of self-consciousness; memorial of a saint.
- saṃsāra* (Sanskrit): the world of phenomena, the cycle of temporal existence; a state of dependence and slavery.
- sat-asat-anirvacanīya* (Sanskrit): inexpressibility between Being and Non-Being.

*satyasya satyam* (Sanskrit): true reality.

*savikalpa* (Sanskrit): a mental construct.

*skepsis*: pretext or excuse (constant critical examination of the objects of knowledge whose principles are systematically thrown into doubt, preventing arrival at a definitive conclusion).

*śruti* (Sanskrit): knowledge, revealed truth.

*śūnyatā* (Sanskrit): emptiness, vacuity, nothing; represents ultimate reality in Buddhism.

*sūtra* (Sanskrit): literally "string," aphorism that requires a comment (*bhāṣya*).

*svadharma* (Sanskrit): personal *dharma*, something similar to the ontic position of every being in the order of beings.

*svayamprakāśa*: irradiation of reality.

*synergos* (Greek): collaborator, auxiliary, partner.

*tempiternity*: a-dual vision of time and eternity; eternal dimension of time.

*third eye*: superior level of knowledge that, together with the empirical and the intellectual levels, provides the vision of reality.

*upāya* (Sanskrit): means, method.

*vāc* (Sanskrit): word.

*vrata* (Sanskrit): oath, religious observance.

*yama/niyama* (Sanskrit): abstentions and precepts of yoga.

*zōē* (Greek): Life, what gives something life (*bios*).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An international authority on spirituality, the study of religions, and intercultural dialogue, Raimon Panikkar has made intercultural and dialogical pluralism one of the hallmarks of his research, becoming a master "bridge builder," tireless in the promotion of dialogue between Western culture and the great Oriental Hindū and Buddhist traditions.

Born in 1918 in Barcelona of a Spanish Catholic mother and an Indian Hindū father, he is part of a plurality of traditions: Indian and European, Hindū and Christian, scientific and humanistic.

Panikkar holds degrees in chemistry, philosophy, and theology, and was ordained a Catholic priest in 1946. He has delivered courses and lectures in major European, Indian, and American universities.

A member of the International Institute of Philosophy (Paris), of the permanent Tribunal of the Peoples (Rome), and of the UNESCO Commission for intercultural dialogue, he has also founded various philosophical journals and intercultural study centers. He has held conferences in each of the five continents (including the renowned Gifford Lectures in 1988–1989 on "Trinity and Atheism").

Panikkar has received international recognitions including honorary doctorates from the University of the Balearic Islands in 1997, the University of Tübingen in 2004, Urbino in 2005, and Girona in 2008, as well as prizes ranging from the "Premio Menéndez Pelayo de Humanidades" for his book *El concepto de naturaleza* in Madrid in 1946 to the "Premio Nonino 2001 a un maestro del nostro tempo" in Italy.

Since 1982 he has lived in Tavertet in the Catalanian mountains, where he continues his contemplative experience and cultural activities. There he founded and presides over the intercultural study center Vivarium. Panikkar has published more than fifty books in various languages and hundreds of articles on the philosophy of religion, theology, the philosophy of science, metaphysics, and indology.

From the dialogue between religions to the peaceful cohabitation of peoples; from reflections on the future of the technological society to major work on political and social intelligence; from the recognition that all interreligious dialogue is based on an intrareligious dialogue to the promotion of open knowledge of other religions, of which he is a mediator; from his penetrating analysis of the crisis in spirituality to the practice of meditation and the rediscovery of his monastic identity; from the invitation of *colligite fragmenta* as a path toward the integration of reality to the proposal of a new innocence, Panikkar embodies a personal journey of fulfillment.

Among his most important publications with Orbis are: *velo della realtà* (2000); *L'incontro indispensabile: dialogo delle religioni* (2001); *Pace e interculturalità. Una*

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